



**BEN AMES
WILLIAMS**

**SENSUAL, TEMPTING, IRRESISTIBLE—
PERFECT BAIT TO TRAP A SLAYER**

**a
KILLER
among
us**



Originally published as **THE SILVER FOREST** by **E. P. Dutton & Co.**

Digitized by

Google

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY



The girl, he thought, would be safe . . . but somewhere in the silent, snow-bound house, a killer lurked. And in the dark living room, alone, Bob Coxon sat waiting—a deliberate, perfect target . . .

Time passed—nerve-tingling and interminable. There was no other way to draw the killer into the open. And then suddenly a horrible realization burst upon Coxon. It was not to him that the killer would come, but to someone else who suspected his identity—to one of the unguarded, sleeping women above . . .

Coxon leaped to his feet. But at the same instant, from overhead, came a long and strangling scream, appalling in its message of fear and pain . . .

If Coxon were too late . . .



A LION LIBRARY EDITION

A Killer

(Original Title



Complete and Unabridged

Among Us

The Silver Forest)

Ben Ames Williams



**Lion Library Editions
655 Madison Avenue
New York City**



*Originally published by E. P. Dutton & Co., under the title
The Silver Forest*

*Lion Library Edition, by arrangement with Marathon Publishing
Corp., published February, 1957*

*Copyright, MCMXXIV, by The Curtis Publishing Co., MCMXXVI,
by E. P. Dutton & Co.*

Manufactured in U.S.A.



Cover painting by Robert Stanley

A Killer Among Us

Chapter One

THERE is at the upper end of one of the most conspicuous of the three thousand lakes which dot the state of Maine with silver, a small and compact community which may fairly be called the portal of the north.

This is one of those places which were born and have endured because of their relation to the natural arteries of travel. The great lake itself is the source of waters which flow southward; its northern end approaches within two miles of a wide river, along which canoes may turn either east or west and shortly find watercourses which lead still further north, into the deeper wilderness. A hundred years ago all travel hereabouts was by water; now the railroads have penetrated to the foot of the lake, and even to a point halfway up its western shore, and those who would venture into the wild come thus far in conventional ways before committing themselves to the graceful little craft which are at once frail and astonishingly resilient, light yet strong. Such travelers almost inevitably pass through the community at the northern end of the lake.

Here there is a hotel, a frame structure of the sort for which materials could be most easily secured at hand or transported from a distance. The store near by will supply the adventurer with everything he may reasonably desire. By the lake shore, at the landward end of the long pier, which stretches out through the shallows to the deeper water where the steamer can make a way, a warehouse spreads its wide bulk, and its shadowy interior is packed with crates and bales and boxes and coarse bags filled with provisions and supplies. Beyond the hotel, along the lake front and facing a continuous walk of boards, there are cabins built of peeled spruce logs and fitted to accommodate four or six or eight people each. In a small octagonal pavilion with a pointed roof there is sometimes dancing of a summer's evening. Between the warehouse

and the store a road runs away from the lake, straight as a string, up the slight rise of ground and down again to the river, two miles away; and along this road for half a mile, in log cabins built to suit the owners' tastes, live a group of shrewd and skillful men accustomed to woods ways who will guide the neophyte anxious to set foot in the wilderness beyond the portal. Fifty years ago squared timbers laid along this road served as rails upon which ran a heavy wagon drawn by oxen, which transported boats and canoes and duffel from the lake to the river or back again. Now this transport is done by a motortruck, vast and noisy, whose racket resounds so continually that even the timid deer, browsing near the road, no more than lift their heads when from their covert within the wood they watch it thunder by.

From fly time in the spring, when the leaves first put forth their luxuriance, until frost time in the fall, this little community, remote from the world, is cloaked and surrounded by tangled woods. These forests lack the dignity of age. All the land hereabouts has been lumbered within the memory of a young man; second growth has taken the place of ancient spruce and pine. New lumber is making all the time, the young trees protected by the tangled hardwood which first reclaimed the stripped levels and slopes and ridges. One or two rough and overgrown wood roads thread their way through this colossal thicket, and if you follow such a trail it may lead you by and by to a clearing or an opening in the midst of the forest where the new stuff has not yet asserted its recapture of the ground once wrenched from its hold. Cloaked in leaves, this surrounding forest has a velvety look, as though it were soft and easily penetrated; but when frost strips off the velvet greenery it is possible to perceive the harsh bare trunks and branches of the trees like prison bars, containing the remote community and preventing any easy access to the hinterland.

Winter comes early hereabouts; comes impatiently and abruptly. Sometimes snow falls before the last leaves have turned from green to red or yellow or brown, as though the scurrying and impatient flakes could not wait for frost to clear their way. But such early snows seldom last. The earth, still warm from summer's sun, receives them meltingly and they soften and disappear. After such an early flurry,

a day or two like summer often follows; but this relief is only apparent. Silently, all day and all the long night, the leaves detach themselves from the trees and flutter to earth until at last every twig is bare. Then when snow comes it is more apt to stay; and ice forms in the shallow coves along the lake shore, reaching lancelike fingers out across the surface of the water to feel the way to a more complete conquest. The open lake, fretted by winds, breaks off these icy fingers and destroys them for a time, but in the end yields to their persistent encroachments, and beneath the ice upon which snow lays a white coverlet the waters rest at last in their long winter sleep.

Until the ice thus forms, a steamer makes daily trips up and down the lake and people come and go. The deer, so friendly and so easily discovered in the summertime, learn wisdom now and retreat into remote coverts before the stabbing guns.

There is a flurry of haste in the air, as though many things must be done before the cold locks all in immobility. Beneath skies dull or bright, men work with feverish hurry; and even the stuffy little steamer seems more brisk and businesslike in keeping its engagements.

Upon a certain afternoon in late fall a group of men stood or sat upon the veranda which runs across the front and side of the hotel, waiting for the coming of the steamer. The day was dark and gray as a goose's wing and the air was hushed and still. Here and there, in sheltered or shadowed spots, remained some vestiges of a tracking snow which had fallen a week before and elsewhere melted in the sun. Faint blue smoke from the hotel and the store hung in a motionless and dissolving cloud above the chimneys from which it had emerged. The scent of wood fires caressed the nostrils. The day was, for the season, mild; but the gray skies had their warning for an accustomed eye.

The men on the veranda of the hotel were dressed in that unostentatious yet adequate fashion which distinguishes persons accustomed to the woods. They wore by way of footgear either leather-topped rubber shoes or heavy rubbers over felt boots. Their stiff woolen trousers were stuffed inside wool socks. Their shirts, varying in design or pattern, were all of wool, sufficiently warm so that their coats were worn rather for the convenience of the pockets they contained than for the weight of the garments

themselves. One or two of these men wore caps; the others had soft felt hats, sweat-stained, battered and old, each shaping itself in a friendly fashion to the owner's head. Their hands were bare. They smoked pipes if they smoked at all, and their talk, though it was persistent and continuous, was in tones steady and grave and low.

These men were engaged in questioning one of their number. He who was questioned was as old as the oldest of them; a small man with square shoulders held well back, and a small, well-shaped head upon a steady neck. His mustache was grizzled and uneven, and so were the brows which overhung his deep-set eyes. His nose was small, his chin well fashioned, and he smoked an old black pipe, its edges burned away or chipped off by impact with wood or stone when he had knocked out the smoldering dottle. This pipe he had filled with tobacco whittled from a plug. The rank smoke which drifted up in tiny threads from its bowl was blue; that which emerged from between his firm lips was less blue than gray. He drew smoke through the stem with each inhalation of his breath, expelled it with each exhalation. The pipe, firmly gripped between two teeth, seemed a part of his countenance and inseparable from it. When he removed it from his mouth his appearance changed as does the appearance of one familiar to our eyes when he removes spectacles habitually worn.

This man's name was Bob Coxon. He had been all his life a man of the woods, whether as lumberman, trapper, hunter, warden or guide. The forests had left upon him their characteristic mark. He wore like a garment a certitude and a confidence in his own powers; his eyes, slightly narrowed, were steady and keen, such eyes as can look without a change of expression on good chance or on bad. His cheeks were like leather, as was the skin of his neck visible above the collar of his shirt. His hands were square and strong, the fingers blunt, the nails broken, the joints somewhat gnarled. About his movements there was a certain square and muscular precision different from the almost indolent grace of his companions, who in any posture seemed perfectly at ease and relaxed. Their ways seemed effortless; when they paddled or poled a canoe it appeared to an observer rather as though they were themselves moved and controlled by some gentle power than that they supplied impulse and propulsion. Coxon differed from his

companions in this respect. What he did was done with a certain vigor, a suggestion of haste and effort. He never seemed a part of his canoe; seemed quite definitely to master and direct it as truly as he did the paddle gripped in his hands.

In repose now, sitting on the edge of the porch with his legs hanging, there was still something alert in his bearing. His cap brim was low on his brow, so that in order to see beneath it his head was tilted firmly back upon his neck. The effect was to hold his shoulders erect; he sat with an almost military precision. His feet hung as still as though they were pressed upon some solid footing. Such a bearing as his is often the mark of a self-important man without sense of humor; but this was not true of Coxon. He was competent and alert and fit for the tasks that faced him; he had a shrewd common sense, a definite fund of wit when he chose to let it appear, and that capacity for estimating character which men acquire who sit day after day in the stern of a canoe while strangers come and go in the forward seat.

He had, during the years of his wood service, seen every manner of man; had watched the backs of their heads, the set of their shoulders. He had answered their questions, innocent or sophisticated, interested or merely ignorant. Quiet men and loud, arrogant and modest, friendly and insolent, lazy and helpful; for years they had come and gone and sometimes returned again. And now and then a woman rode in Coxon's canoe; and the little man, who had never married, nevertheless acquired a certain insight into their marital processes. Since he sat behind them, they sometimes forgot he was there; forgot they had an audience. The man in the stern used to amuse himself by guessing, from what they did or the direction of their glances or the alterations of their position, what their thoughts might be. He never aired this ability; it did not occur to him to do so. But sometimes, if they had read his thoughts as he read theirs, his passengers would have been astounded and dismayed.

It is difficult to deceive such a man. Those who knew him best did not attempt it. He had somewhat of a reputation in the whole reach and extent of the northern woods, a territory two hundred miles across in any direction you might choose; and this had resulted, a few years before,

in his being engaged by Warren Pring to act as caretaker and guide at Pring's camp on the northern shore of Curlew Pond, twenty-odd miles northwest of the little community already described. It was to meet Pring, coming on the steamer with a party of friends for a few days at this camp, and a chance at deer, that Coxon was here today.

He had been busy these six days past with preparations to receive Pring and his guests. It had been necessary to transport a stock of supplies to the camp; to make sure there was adequate bedding; to set up a stove or two. He had succeeded to his great satisfaction in enlisting the services of Jean Bruton as cook; and he had hired Mose Bulard and Ike Newry, to supplement his own endeavors, as guides. Past experience told him these would be enough, for though Pring's party would include seven people—Coxon had expected only six till he got Pring's telegram the night before, warning him that one had been added to the party—three of the number would be women, and it was unlikely that the men would all wish to go into the woods every day. Coxon was thrifty, even with Pring's money, so he had engaged only this minimum of guides.

He himself had put the camp in order, working tirelessly. Pring always left there a certain amount of fishing tackle and some guns and ammunition; and Coxon had put away the tackle and oiled and overhauled the guns.

"I meant to bring over that target pistol," he remarked now, in response to something one of the others had said. "Firing pin broke off last time Mr. Pring used it, and it ought to ha' been fixed before. Forgot all about it till right now."

"I saw him cut off a pa'tridge's head with that, much as twenty yards away, one day last fall," someone remarked; and Coxon nodded.

"He's a good man that way," he agreed.

"Ike and Mose gone up to the camp, ain't they?"

Coxon assented.

"They started right after dinner. There was some stuff to go, and they took their canoes. I kept the motorboat to take us over in the morning."

"Be some crowded, won't she?"

"If there's too much truck I'll send back, or ask one of you boys to paddle it over." He got to his feet. "Guess I'll

telephone—see if they've got to camp yet." And he went into the office of the hotel.

While he was gone there was some talk of the weather. The others agreed that it promised snow; that another fortnight might well see the lake frozen up. When Coxon rejoined them the steamer was in sight, dull white upon the slate-gray waters of the lake, dark smoke trailing listlessly from her stack. Coxon said, "There she is," and they all went toward the pier, upon which a flat car on wheels, traveling on squared timbers which served as rails, and drawn by a plodding horse, was already inching its way out toward the pier head to bring luggage and freight ashore.

They moved slowly, small figures against enormous background; their steps sounded lightly in the vast silence; the impact of rubber upon splintered boards was audible like a subdued whispering. One of the men kicked a stone aside upon the scum ice in the shallows, and the loud crackle which resulted accentuated the hush of the early evening. The steamer whistled in a subdued tone, the white cloud of steam giving them warning what to expect before the sound reached their ears. From one of the more distant shores, after an extended interval, a faint echo returned to them. It was so still that while the steamer was yet a quarter of a mile away they could hear the hiss of the water under her bows and the rumble of her engines.

When she made her landing, the necessary commands were given softly, as though those who spoke would not disturb this quiet. Coxon, his eyes searching the deck, discovered Pring and his wife side by side at the stern, and he tugged at the peak of his cap. Pring responded with a gesture and Mrs. Pring smiled. Then the lines were fast and the passengers began to come ashore.

Chapter Two

Coxon met Pring as he stepped upon the wharf. Warren Pring was a man tall and robust, approaching forty years old, yet with the flat lines which go with good condition. His face had that firm roundness seen in men of such an age, smooth cheeks molded by the muscles on the jaws beneath, broad brows presenting here and there plane surfaces as though a sculptor's chisel had shaped them. His dark hair, streaked with gray, was cut short and brushed stiffly forward, innocent of any part, so that it lay with an effect like that of bangs across his forehead. It was cropped so close as to reveal the perfect circular curve of his head from brow to nape, testifying to intellectual capacity. He was brown, as though accustomed to be much out-of-doors; and his blue eyes, so light they seemed pale, were curiously conspicuous against this dark background of cheeks and brow. There was in his countenance, except when he spoke or listened, something stern and almost sorrowful. When he spoke, interest lighted his eyes; when he listened, attention lent his features a certain rigidity. He was a lawyer; his utterance had that measured and careful tone which his work in court reflected, and when he asked a question or made a statement it was in terms precise and clear.

While he exchanged a clasp of the hand with Coxon he inquired, "You had my telegram, I suppose?" Coxon nodded.

"They phoned it from the foot of the lake."

"You are quite ready for us then?"

"All ready. I've got Jean Bruton to cook."

"I remember him well. Jean is an excellent cook."

"And Ike Newry and Mose Bullard," Coxon continued.

"Guess that'll be enough."

Pring glanced toward where the other members of the party were gathered, chattering together.

"Yes," he agreed. "We shall not be very strenuous."

"We'll go up in the morning," Coxon told him.

"It is too late tonight?"

"Yes."

"Well, we can be comfortable here."

Pring glanced toward the shore, where yellow lamplight now began to illumine a window here and there, as dusk thickened all about them. Mrs. Pring came toward them. She had striking personal charm, as much the result of some quality within herself as of her outward beauty. That combination of dark hair and blue eyes which is always effective was hers. Coxon had seen her half a dozen times, when she came with her husband to the camp on Curlew Pond; and sometimes she provoked him to unspoken conjecture.

Pring, at her approach, was momentarily silent; then said formally, "You remember Bob Coxon, Carlotta."

"I certainly do," she assured the old woodsman, extending her gloved hand, which he grasped firmly.

"He suggests that we stay here tonight," her husband explained. She nodded.

"I always prefer going up by daylight," she agreed, and with another smile toward Coxon started to rejoin her guests. "Coming, Warren?" she asked her husband, a curiously wistful note in her voice.

"I want a word with Coxon," he replied, and she and the others went away along the pier. Pring stood by, watching while Coxon loaded their luggage aboard the flat car. Then he and the old guide followed it toward the shore. "Are many deer being killed?" Pring asked.

"They've brought in quite a few," Coxon told him. "One buck last week weighed over three hundred, but the horns wasn't any good."

"Doctor Moal is anxious to get a good head," Pring said; and when Coxon looked at him inquiringly, he explained: "Doctor Moal is the small man. He has done a good deal of hunting. A good shot. You will like him. He is one of my oldest friends."

"None of these folks ever been up here with you, have they?" Pring shook his head.

"The doctor and I planned to come alone," he explained. "But Mrs. Rotch thought she would like to kill a deer. She likes fishing and she has used a gun. Her coming meant

her husband, too, of course. You will find him content to sit around the camp. Of course, if Mrs. Rotch came, Carlotta had to come along, and we invited Grace Taber at Doctor Moal's suggestion. She's one of Carlotta's old friends."

"Who's the other man?" Coxon asked.

"Bill Wardle," Pring replied, and hesitated a moment. "He is my brother-in-law. He married my sister Elizabeth. You remember her?"

"Twins, wan't you?" Coxon inquired, and Pring nodded.

"I've known Bill ever since we were in college together," he explained. "He is one of these men who mean well; but he talks too much and too loudly. He and my sister did not get along, you know. They are divorced. Oh, they are superficially friendly enough still; and he and I never had an open break. Bill heard about our plans and invited himself. He is the added starter, the extra one."

"He carries too much extra weight to do much in the woods," Coxon commented. They had come ashore and paused by the hotel veranda.

"Oh, Bill can handle himself," Pring replied. "He's rather an able citizen, but he chooses to play the amiable idiot most of the time."

Wardle had attracted Coxon's attention on the pier-head. His voice was loud, as though he were unconscious of the hushing effect of early evening; and he had laughed boisterously at his own jests. Coxon, whose ears were attuned to the silence of the forest, resented this; he thought he detected in Pring's tones, behind the fair kindliness of his words, some of the resentment he himself felt.

His mild dislike of Wardle was intensified at their first encounter. When he delivered the bags and gun cases and other dunnage to the two cabins where the party would spend the night, Mrs. Pring took the occasion to introduce him to Grace Taber and Julie Rotch, with whom she shared one cabin.

Grace Taber greeted him with a quiet word and a faint smile in which he thought he perceived unhappiness; but Julie pressed his hand and said cordially, "It must be wonderful to live up here in such a beautiful country all the time, Mr. Coxon. Don't you find it so?"

"Well, it's what I'm used to."

"But don't you ever get lost? It seems so immense. Do you really know your way around?"

"Same as you do around your home," he assured her good-humoredly.

"I think that's marvelous," she insisted. "Everything up here just looks the same to me. Nothing but woods. Will we see a deer, do you think?"

He smiled in faint amusement.

"I expect we can find you one," he said. As he went toward the cabin where the men were lodged, he decided that in spite of her manner, Mrs. Rotch was a singularly level-headed young woman. "Take her in your canoe, nobody else around; she's prob'bly right sensible," he told himself.

Pring showed him where to stow the stuff in the other cabin, and he shook hands with the other men in the party. Wardle shook his hand and clapped him on the shoulder and called him "old man." Doctor Moal, whom Pring addressed as Chet, acknowledged the introduction with a nod and a word, and Coxon faintly approved his poise and manner.

Rotch was more effusive in his greeting. He produced a flask and urged Coxon to sample it, sought to override the guide's refusal, insisted that the contents were worth a trial. Pring had to interfere.

"Coxon's a teetotaler, Bert," he told Rotch. "He hasn't touched a drop since prohibition."

Rotch looked at Coxon in surprise.

"That so?" he asked. "What'd you stop for?"

"It looked like a good time," Coxon replied mildly; and though Rotch laughed, it was with a reservation, as though he felt constrained to an unwilling respect. But Wardle suffered from no such inhibition.

"That's a hot one," he exclaimed in his loud, jovial tones. "That's some little fairy tale." He clapped Coxon on the shoulder again. "Bet you freeze a keg or two of hard cider every winter. Come now, isn't that so?" Coxon not replying, he appealed to the others for confirmation. "How about it? Does he look like that kind of a blamed fool? I ask you!"

Rotch said good-naturedly, "Don't argue with him, Bill. The less he drinks, the more there'll be for us."

Pring touched Coxon's arm and stepped out-of-doors,

glancing upward, where night cloaked the gray and overcast sky.

"I heard someone say you looked for snow," he remarked.

"It's apt to snow," Coxon agreed.

"That will give us some tracking, will it not?"

"Unless we get too much of it," the other suggested.

"It's rather early for that, is it not?"

"Yes; but you can't tell. It looked like it might snow quite a lot."

"I enjoy a storm up here," Pring said musingly. "The woods are never so lovely as when they are covered with snow."

A woman appeared on the hotel veranda and vigorously rang a bell.

"There's supper," Coxon commented, and moved away toward the hotel, while Pring returned to his guests within the cabin.

The guide was eating at a long table with other woodsmen when the newcomers entered the dining room. They immediately commanded the covert attention of everyone in the room. Their conversation, perfectly audible to Coxon and his companions, gave evidence that they were old and familiar friends. Wardle talked more loudly than the others, though there was perhaps better reason for him to moderate his tones. Coxon thought he appeared to be one of those men who feel it their duty to enliven any gathering in which they find themselves. He was a habitual buffoon; and if his jests were sometimes broad, the others seemed to expect nothing else from him. Yet there was apparent an undercurrent of distaste; and once or twice Coxon thought Wardle himself was not so sure of his welcome as he seemed to be. The other men were more silent, permitting him to monopolize the conversation. Rotch, relaxed in his chair, with his eyes upon the fork with which his fingers toyed, grinned in humorless fashion as he listened. Pring wore a sober surface cordiality, while Doctor Moal silently devoted himself to the victuals set before him, and even when Wardle's remarks were addressed to him personally, avoided a reply. Mrs. Pring and Grace Taber and Wardle sustained the conversation. Coxon thought the party, save for Wardle's presence, a well-assorted one.

After supper Pring stopped in the smoky lobby of the hotel and he and Coxon played four-handed cribbage with

two guides, winning handily. When Pring decided he would go to bed Coxon walked with him to his cabin. There they found Rotch and Mrs. Pring playing bridge as partners against Doctor Moal and Mrs. Rotch; and until the rubber should be finished, Pring stayed outside with Coxon, considering plans for the following day. The voices of those inside came out to them and they heard Wardle's name mentioned. Coxon said, with that freedom which old acquaintance justified, "Mr. Wardle don't seem like the kind that comes up here." Pring smiled.

"Bill is a curious fellow," he explained. "He's a stock-broker; but he inherited money, and spends most of his time enjoying it. Most people feel like kicking him, but he seems to take it for granted that you like him and enjoy his humor. He is a hard man to snub."

"Mr. Rotch don't feel the way you do about him," Coxon suggested, and Pring smiled.

"They are old friends," he replied. "But it just happens that Bill lost some money for Rotch. Wardle knows less about the stock market than I do, but he is always ready to give advice, and Rotch was foolish enough to follow it. Having done so, he blames Wardle instead of blaming himself."

The rubber ended and the players came out, the two women turning toward their cabin next door.

Doctor Moal asked quietly, "Where's Wardle?"

"We haven't seen him," Pring replied. "Did he go out?" The doctor hesitated.

"He and Grace started for a little walk after dinner," he said at last. "We supposed they were with you."

Wardle's voice came to them, from a point so near at hand they were startled.

"Here we are," he called loudly. "Who's paging us?" He and his companion came into the light which shone out of the window from a lamp within the cabin, and Coxon had a momentary impression that Miss Taber was pale and angry before she slipped past them and with a low word of good night disappeared into the other cabin. "We walked up the road a way," Wardle explained jovially. "Thought we might come on a deer, but the only wild life we encountered was a skunk. Startled Grace a bit, I think."

Rotch said insolently, "Shouldn't think she'd mind, being with you." Wardle laughed aloud.

"Tally one!" he exclaimed. "But I'll get you for that, Bert. The drinks are on me. I've a bottle of bourbon handy, right in the top of my grip. Come inside."

He and Rotch went into the cabin, and Coxon saw Doctor Moal and Pring exchange glances.

The doctor said in a low voice, "You can't insult the man. He doesn't know what you mean."

Pring made no comment, and Coxon said good night and left the two together on the wide board-walk before the cabins. He himself slept in the hotel, and as he finished his brief preparations for bed, his thoughts engaged themselves with the individuals in the curiously inharmonious group which would, from tomorrow, be in his charge. But for Wardle they would have been, he thought, sufficiently congenial; but the fat man's presence quite obviously made for discord and irked them all. To Coxon's sensibilities, always keenly attuned, the situation seemed vaguely to threaten misfortune or disaster. He was conscious of a momentary reluctance and dread. Pring, for all his courteous restraint, evidently resented Wardle's intrusion; and Rotch and Doctor Moal took no pains to hide their feeling toward the fat man. Whatever the attitude of the others might be, the hostility of the three men made for friction and might well, in that close communion which their surroundings would enforce upon them all, lead to unpleasant incidents.

Miss Taber was an element in the situation with which Coxon already perceived it might be necessary to reckon. There could be no doubt that she had some reluctant and unhappy tenderness for the fat man; yet it seemed to Coxon this feeling was not reciprocal. Her expression when she and Wardle emerged into the light of the lamp was fixed vividly in his mind. It takes a very little discord to destroy the harmony of such a party as this one was to be. Coxon thought it was begun under the worst of auspices.

Chapter Three

THEY reached the camp at Curlew Pond in time for lunch next day. The journey had been made, first by motor-truck across the height of land from lake to river; thence by motor boat upstream, and up a small tributary brook which was the outlet of the pond, and then up the length of the pond itself. The twenty-mile journey occupied some three hours' time, and after leaving the landing on the river they saw no human being. The forest received them and engulfed them, shutting out the world. The reach of river which they traversed was dead water, black and still, the surface flecked by fallen leaves which had lost their brilliant coloring and were sodden and dull. Along the banks tall elms rose bare of foliage, their skeletons like the frames of enormous lyres. The brook up which they passed to enter the lake was narrow and tortuous; and there had been moments when they could reach out and touch the low branches of the alders which cloaked either bank.

Once Coxon checked the motorboat at Pring's request to show them traces of an ancient beaver dam, long since abandoned; and he was able to point out sticks from which the bark had been stripped by bank beavers that still dwelt hereabouts. At times they seemed in a *cul-de-sac*, so abrupt were the windings of the brook ahead of them; and once or twice Coxon had to use his pole to fend them off or even to help them through water so shallow that their progress was impeded. The flow of water here was slight, since lake and river were at almost the same level. When they at length emerged into the open lake, it was to discover a group of rocky islets ahead of them; and on a shingly point at one side Coxon saw and pointed out a doe, so far away that he forbade their attempting the shot, since if the deer were wounded he would have to spend, in trailing it, time better occupied in going forward to camp, where Bruton would have luncheon ready.

When the islands were left behind them, Pring discovered faint blue smoke rising from hidden chimneys where the camp lay far ahead; and as they drew closer the outline of the main building became faintly visible through the cloaking trees. There were four tall spruces between it and the water, so that though the hardwood growth was bare of leaves, the camp was still sheltered and concealed. Bullard and Newry were on the wharf and helped them land.

This camp of Pring's, which he had bought some years before, was a large and comfortable establishment. As a matter of preference rather than of economy, he had refused to put in an electric-light plant or running water, and the place was lighted by kerosene lamps and heated by fireplaces and by stoves, large or small, in the various rooms. But it was substantially built and weatherproof, and it was perfectly feasible to be comfortable here in the coldest seasons. Pring sometimes came in deep winter, traveling by snowshoe up the lake and across the height of land and through the forest. Coxon stayed here practically all the time; trapping in a conservative and thrifty fashion during the winter, careful not to exhaust the fur, covering only territory which Pring either owned or leased from the paper companies which had bought and stripped this land some thirty years before and now held it for the sake of the growing spruce.

There was a floating wharf which could be lifted and stored on the bank during the winter, and a boathouse built on rows of bowlers and secure against any ordinary stress. From the wharf a broad gravel-and-sand walk led up to the verandas of the main camp. In the woods behind, at a distance of a hundred yards or so, a spring emerged from the gravel; and beside this spring there was a stout log cabin for the guides. An ice house stood near the lake shore in a near-by cove. The main camp itself was designed for comfort, whether in summer or winter. On either end, screened verandas extended from front to rear. The kitchen and pantries and a bedroom occupied the ground floor on the side away from the water. Facing the water there was a large living room, where the meals were also served; and at one end of this room, on either side of the stairs which led upward, two doors opened into smaller rooms. One, Pring called the armory. In it were gun racks and cases and cabinets where fishing tackle

in great variety and profusion was always kept in readiness. Pring had half a dozen fly rods which he treasured, as well as trolling gear and land lines for ice fishing. In the gun racks there were two or three shotguns, a light twenty-eighth gauge which Mrs. Pring sometimes used, and two twelves; and besides these there were rifles ranging from a 30-30 down to a .22-caliber for target shooting. This latter was equipped with a silencer, so that to fire it would not alarm the game in the neighborhood of the camp. There were also three or four light-caliber pistols, one single-shot and the others automatics.

The other small room under the stairs was the library, well stocked with books calculated to suit every taste. Pring himself preferred biography and history. Mrs. Pring, who had a voice of extraordinary beauty, with which she had done some professional work before her marriage, had a considerable musical library. There was also a piano in the living room, but the difficulty of keeping this in tune almost precluded its use. The library shelves held a mass of lighter reading and the room itself, though small, was comfortable and appealing. A tiny stove heated it. Over its door hung a heavy curtain of deer hides sewed together in such a manner that only the furred sides were exposed. A similar hanging covered the gun-room door. It was possible, in either of these small rooms, to be secluded and alone. Each had French windows opening on the veranda outside; but in the library a high-backed couch was set against these windows, effectually blocking them.

When Pring and his guests arrived this day, they found Bruton had luncheon ready to serve, the table laid in the living room; and they sat down at once. Bruton prided himself on being an exceptional woods cook, and Coxon had provided the ingredients necessary to give his abilities full play. Bullard had caught two large lake trout in the pond the evening before, and Bruton, having scalded these fish in such a manner that the oily outer skin was easily removed, had prepared trout steaks and broiled them. The long journey of the morning made them all hungry; their praises of the cook were extravagant.

After luncheon, Mrs. Pring assigned her guests to their rooms. Wardle and Doctor Moal shared the large bedroom on the first floor, which opened directly into the living room and had also French windows which permitted access to

the veranda on that side. Julie Rotch and her husband occupied quarters over the armory, and Grace Taber's room adjoined theirs, its door facing the head of the stairs. Pring and Mrs. Pring were across the hall. The appropriate bags and luggage had already been bestowed in these rooms by the guides. Grace Taber and Mrs. Rotch donned knickerbockers, and Pring and Doctor Moal also assumed garments better suited to their surroundings; but Wardle and Rotch seemed satisfied to sit in the living room with a siphon and bottle on the table between them. Coxon came to the door to see whether they were comfortable, and Julie demanded that he take her to find a deer. He smiled and promised to do so later in the afternoon.

While Pring was in his room, changing his clothes, Carlotta took the opportunity for a word alone with him there. She knocked before entering, and at his summons, opened the door and closed it behind her. Thus alone, it became immediately apparent that there was a restraint between them; a restraint which they concealed when others were about.

She asked formally, "Do you find everything you need?"

"Thank you, yes," he replied.

"Julie's going after a deer with Coxon." He smiled.

"If she gets one, she will be pleased."

"The others are talking about bridge—at least, Bill is."

"Rotch and Grace will play with him," Pring commented. "I don't think Chet cares for it."

"I'm afraid Bill is going to spoil things more or less," she suggested. "I was so sorry we had to ask him."

He said politely, "It's a matter of small account." She shook her head.

"I know you don't like him," she insisted. "I should think he would see that." Her husband smiled dryly.

"The only way to make Bill Wardle see a thing like that is to kick him," he declared. "I've tried everything else."

"Grace wanted him to come," she explained.

"Grace?" he asked, in faint surprise. "I thought she and Chet—"

"I'm hoping for that," Carlotta told him. "They're made for each other. That's why I invited Grace. But she has some mad idea about Bill."

"What is it women discover in the man?" he asked. She shook her head.

"He's so sure of himself, perhaps."

"I don't think Bess ever really loved him," Pring declared, thinking of his sister. "Yet she married him and tried to stick it out. Sometimes I'm the same way. Sometimes I half like him."

"A small party like this makes it difficult," she remarked. "Bert Rotch is furious with him about that stock business. He says the most insulting things; seems to be taunting Bill into resenting them. And he told me today that Chet had some of that stock, too, on Bill's advice."

"I didn't know that," Pring commented. "Chet can't afford to lose money in the market."

"He did," Carlotta insisted. "He detests Bill, you know. And he's really fond of Grace, I'm sure. That doesn't help any, with her hanging on everything Bill says." Pring smiled.

"A merry party, is it not?" he remarked.

"I don't think Bill cares anything about her."

Pring was bent over, lacing tall boots.

"She's a nice girl," he said.

"Did you hear that terrible story he told at dinner last night?"

"When Bill says anything, everyone hears," he replied. She moved restlessly about the room.

"We'll have to keep things going as smoothly as we can," she said musingly. As he rose she came toward him and murmured, "I wish we were alone here, Warren—just you and I. Like the first time."

"Why?" he asked politely.

"I feel we need some time together, dear. I feel you're shutting me out."

He said good-naturedly, "Where did you get that idea, Carlotta?"

She put her arm through his with a gesture faintly beseeching.

"Your eyes are so hard when you look at me. I can feel that you're tired and unhappy so many times, and I want to help you and don't know how."

"I get tired when I am busy, of course." His tone was utterly matter of fact.

"You're not frank with me," she urged.

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, this business of Bill Wardle, for instance," she re-

plied. "I know how you hate him, Warren. I've seen you look at him, and sometimes I've been afraid you'd strangle the man—when he speaks about Bess."

His face became suffused with blood, but his voice was quiet.

"I do resent that," he admitted. "Bess is my sister, you know; and we have always been pretty close to each other. There's a certain sympathy between us. The jackass makes sport of everything, though; I suppose he's bound to make a joke of—all that."

"I hated asking him. I'm so afraid you blame me."

He shook his head.

"He made it impossible to refuse."

"But you defend him, to me," she insisted. "That's what I mean, Warren—things like that. You keep so many things from me. I've never realized how much you hated him till this time, or I wouldn't have let him come, even for Grace's sake."

"Don't worry about me," he insisted. "I'm quite all right."

So at last she gave over the attempt to draw near him, and he left her and went downstairs. When he was gone, she lay down for a while on her bed, her arm flung across her eyes, tears flowing. More and more, for months now, she had felt that she and her husband were falling away from each other. More and more she had been sure that he let her see only the surface of his life. She was ten years younger than he, and at the time of their marriage she had been impressed with the responsibility of being mistress of his home. The effect had been slowly to stifle and obliterate some of that exuberant youth and gayety which he had loved in her. On his part, Pring, before their marriage, had wooed her with an ardor and an insistent devotion which made him a glamorous figure in her eyes; but after they were married she found him more and more inclined to be matter of fact and to fit into a routine. He had the legal, the judicial mind; he was eminently reasonable; his poise was remarkable and seldom ruffled. He never made an enemy, was on friendly terms with everyone, never said or did anything which might awaken resentment. But there was no warmth in his bearing; and Carlotta, who was sensitive and finely attuned, felt more and more that beneath the surface of courtesy and kindness

which he showed her and showed the world, he was cold and stern. She had tried a thousand means to reawaken in him that ardent tenderness which had made her love him; but still without success.

Their life together had in fact been too orderly and too smooth. Their children were healthy and charming, never giving rise to worry or concern; Carlotta and Pring had never been called upon to endure anxiety or terror or grief together, and it is only the red heat of such emotions which forges the final union between man and wife. They were—and Carlotta dimly perceived this—too calmly happy. It is well for people who love one another to be unhappy together now and then.

She went downstairs by and by and found that Pring had taken his rifle and gone for a tramp in the woods; that Julie had departed with Coxon in the guide's canoe. The others were playing bridge, and she at once perceived that there was an undercurrent of anger in the air. Wardle and Grace Taber were partners; they had been victorious; and Wardle was exulting in his victory and deriding Rotch and Moal because of their non-success. Rotch, a highball at his elbow, grinned mirthlessly under the other's jests; but Doctor Moal gave not even this surface evidence of good feeling. His face was flushed and his lips were white with anger; he played with an intensity that was almost rigor. As Carlotta joined them, Wardle, playing a hand, forced Doctor Moal to choose between two discards; and the physician chose the wrong one and threw down a useless ace on the last trick.

Wardle roared with glee and slapped him on the shoulder and cried, "That's fooling 'em, partner! See that ace go to the boneyard? Who ever said you could play bridge, doc?"

Doctor Moal welcomed Carlotta's coming as a relief; he rose and said to her in a low tone, "Take my hand, I beg of you."

She hesitated, met his eyes and acquiesced.

"I'm sure you want to take a walk before dinner," she remarked. "You must be tired of sitting indoors."

"Tired of getting licked," Wardle amended. "Well, we'll let up on you, Carlotta. We won't beat you quite so badly as we beat him. You see, the doc thinks he's quite a bridge player; and I just had to show him up a little bit."

Doctor Moal had turned his back; he went into the gun room and took up his rifle, drew on coat and cap and went out of doors without looking back at them.

When he was gone, Wardle said to Rotch, "Say, didn't I get his goat?"

"He seemed somewhat provoked," Rotch drawled, and lifted his glass. "You know, Bill, you're enough to disgust a goat, yourself. There's nothing so obnoxious as a bad winner."

"I'll take my chances on being a bad winner, long as I win," Wardle assured him. He shuffled resoundingly and spread the cards so that they might cut for deal. The game went on. Rotch sipped steadily at the whisky and soda beside him.

Moal and Pring came back together, empty-handed, before dinner; and Wardle jeered at their failure as hunters. When presently Coxon and Julie returned with a small doe in the waist of the canoe, which Julie herself had shot by the mouth of one of the brooks that flowed into the pond, Wardle pointed the contrast between her success and the failure of the two men so relentlessly that Pring himself said at last, "It is not necessary to over-emphasize the matter, Bill. We are as pleased as anyone that Julie had good luck."

"Luck, my eye!" Wardle retorted. "That's what the doc said about my bridge. Oh, I know he plays a wonderful game, and you're both wonderful deer slayers, too; but I showed him up, and now Julie's made you both look sick. And all you can find for an alibi is 'luck'!"

Pring frowned, then his countenance relaxed and he made a careless gesture.

"Well, no doubt you're right," he agreed.

Rotch strolled toward the door, and he and Doctor Moal went out on the veranda together and lighted cigarettes, watching the darkness gather and obscure the farther shores of the pond. The sky was still overcast and gray, but it was colder. Doctor Moal marked the fact that Rotch's hand trembled as he scratched a match and held it.

Rotch had been drinking steadily; he said now, "Pleasant company, isn't he?"

"A damned shame he had to be included," Doctor Moal agreed.

"I'd like to strangle him," Rotch said, a sudden venom

in his easy-going tones. "Sometimes I'd like to sink my fingers in his fat neck till they met. He makes me sick."

"We've got to endure him, I suppose."

The other was silent for a moment, and in the faint light Doctor Moal saw his mouth relax into its usual indolent grin.

"Well, thank the Lord this isn't a yacht, anyway. I'll take to the woods myself, if he'll guarantee to stay in camp."

They smoked in silence for a moment; then Coxon came to summon them to dinner.

Doctor Moal asked, "Chance for a deer in the morning, Coxon? We've got meat now, of course, but I should like to pick up a good head."

"It's maybe going to snow," Coxon replied. "We'll have to wait and see."

After dinner Wardle sat down at the piano, which was hopelessly out of tune. The resultant discords amused him; and for half an hour he evoked from the instrument sounds that were painful to any accustomed ear, yet in which he seemed to find astonishing pleasure. Rotch at last started the phonograph and held out his arms to Carlotta, and Pring kicked back the rug in the middle of the floor and Wardle abandoned the piano to dance with Grace Taber. His request anticipated Doctor Moal by a fraction of a second; yet Doctor Moal thought Grace had seen him approaching, had welcomed Wardle as an escape. They danced for an hour, Pring for the most part watching from his chair by the hearth.

Once Rotch, Carlotta in his arms, said to her, "Lucky there's no bouncer about. Have you noticed Bill and Grace?"

"He smothers you," she murmured. "It's not her fault. Deliver me from him!"

"What made you bring him, anyway?"

"Oh, you know Bill," Carlotta sighed.

When at last they grew weary, Pring said he meant to go to bed.

"We will want to get up early, you know," he reminded Doctor Moal.

They went out on the wide veranda together. As soon as the door was closed behind them, and before their eyes became accustomed to the darkness, their ears were struck by a steady and persistent hissing sound.

"Snow," said the doctor.

"You are right," Pring agreed, and went to the edge of the veranda. "This looks very much like the real thing too."

The snow was, indeed, coming down in a swift and impatient rush, the hard round flakes whispering against one another as they sought the earth, so that the air was full of the sound they made. There was no wind; there was only this swift and hurrying flood of white which already carpeted the ground.

"Be rather inconvenient if we got snowed in," the doctor suggested.

"It's too early for a real snow," Pring assured him.

"This looks very like a real snow to me," the other argued.

They stood a little longer, watching, and then returned to the living room. Flakes of snow clung to their garments, anticipated their announcement that it was storming. The others went outside to see.

An hour later they were all abed and sleeping; but the steady hissing of the snow continued all night long and at dawn showed no sign of abating. They were forced to accept the fact that this was no mere flurry, but the beginning of a heavy fall.

Chapter Four

IT CONTINUED snowing for three days, with a steady and monotonous persistence. Now and then a little gust of wind carved the white surface into hollows and furrows; but for the most part the air was still. As the trees became loaded more and more heavily, branches bowed and cracked or broke, and these sharp sounds striking through the hush of the forest came as startlingly as the report of a gun. But for the most part there was no sound save the whispering of the snow, broken at periodical intervals by the blows of an ax when Bullard or Newry labored at the woodpile behind the camp. At daybreak on the first morning after the storm began there was a six-inch carpet of snow; twenty-four hours later this had tripled. Then while a faint wind stirred for a space, the fall slackened, to be resumed at dusk that evening. By the second day it was impossible to go abroad except upon snowshoes, and as a consequence the seven persons in the main camp were imprisoned, forced into a close communion, compelled to be together hour after hour. On the morning after the snow began to fall it was already impossible to escape by water, for the temperature had dropped, and the snow, converted into mush by contact with the waters of the pond, had stiffened into something almost like ice, preventing any passage by boat, yet not sufficiently rigid to sustain any weight. The blanket of new snow which immediately covered this stiffening mixture prevented its freezing more solidly. The telephone line had been broken down, whether by weight of snow or by the impact of a falling tree or branch, they could not know; knew only that the instrument was dead.

The situation was not in any sense serious. There was an old wood road leading away from the camp to the westward, which, at a distance of three or four miles, joined another road that wound toward the river. Along this route

so soon as the fall should cease, it would be possible to send out word, to summon sledges which would offer transport back to civilization. But meanwhile, the snow still falling, Pring and Coxon decided it were better to remain in camp and await the event. With fires in the small stoves and in the great fireplace, they were sufficiently warm; and the camp was provisioned for weeks. The only hardship inherent in the situation was the fact that they were thrown so constantly into one another's company. Incidents which under ordinary circumstances would have seemed amusing became irritating; irritations became affronts. Tempers drew fine and nerves acquired an edge.

In any considerable group of people who adventure into the wilderness together, there is sure to be one person out of harmony with the others. In this company, Wardle filled that rôle. He had a singular trick of annoying, irritating, angering those with whom he came in contact; and this was aggravated by the fact that he seemed completely unconscious of the ill will he evoked. The man went serenely on his way, roaring at his own wit, affable, cordial, jovial.

There is nothing more unpleasant than a good-humored man when you are yourself inclined to be out of humor. This was Wardle's case.

Doctor Moal and Pring found him particularly annoying. The second evening, by one of those perverse chances which insist on occurring, the conversation turned on divorce. There could be no more dangerous ground, yet Wardle seemed quite unconscious of this fact and resisted Carlotta's attempts to divert the talk to other matters. He delivered something like a disquisition on marital infelicitities, illustrating his point by reference to his own experience with Pring's sister.

"You know as well as I do," he told Pring argumentatively, "that Bess and I were in love with each other. Mighty nice girl, Bess is, and I liked her, and there was never anything she did. It was just that we didn't hitch. We're good friends now; always will be, I expect. But if we were still married, we'd fight like terriers."

Pring, seeking to control his mounting fury, said with stiff lips, "Bess is not combative."

Wardle made a generous gesture.

"Lord, man, I know that! Too much the other way.

You know, too much nonresistance is as irritating as too much of the other thing. Sometimes I think a good row would have cleared the air. But when we got into a jam, Bess would just begin to cry."

His manner was largely patronizing, and Pring, unable longer to sit still, flung to his feet and faced the fat man.

"Bill," he said, in choking tones, his face suffused with blood, "a word to you. Don't talk about Bess to me or I will not be responsible for what I do."

Wardle stared at him in astonishment.

"Why, Warren, old man, we were just discussing an abstraction," he replied. Then, with that lack of tact so characteristic of the man, he laughed. "I declare, there are tears in your eyes! You and Bess are twins, sure enough. You cry as easily as she used to."

He checked himself when Pring made a furious movement toward him, and for an instant their eyes met, and Pring's face worked with fury. The others sat rigidly, watching and waiting, till Carlotta touched her husband's arm. The touch seemed to summon him back to sanity; his posture relaxed, and they spoke no more of the incident; but that night when Pring and Carlotta were in their room he referred to it.

"I could hardly keep my hands off him," he declared.

"Your face was terrible," she confessed. "You must watch your temper, Warren. After all, he is our guest."

He nodded, grinning mirthlessly.

"That is his own doing," he commented. "But it is nevertheless true."

"I feel like screaming at him myself sometimes," she admitted. "He's acquiring a new bad habit. He's always touching you. He can't pass you by without putting his hand on your shoulder, mauling you. Every time he does it I feel as though a spider had dropped on me. You know—the way you want to stamp on it, crush it. I've had moments when I wanted to beat him with my fists."

He looked at her in faint amusement.

"It is difficult to imagine you striking out at anyone, Lotta."

"I've a temper, too," she replied seriously. "If I were sure I could hurt him, I think I would hit him—sometimes."

His smile passed and the reserve which was becoming habitual to him settled upon his countenance again.

Pring was not alone in his anger at the fat man, but the scene between these two was the only occasion, during these three days, when smothered passions broke the surface. Doctor Moal was once or twice near choking with anger—once when Wardle undertook to deride the medical profession as a whole, to criticize its ethics, and to make sport of Doctor Moal's own practice. He carried this jest to an extreme.

During the course of a bridge game, Doctor Moal, having failed in an attempted finesse, said casually, "I placed the king in your hand, Wardle."

Wardle, delighted at the other's discomfiture, said jovially, "Diagnosis was correct, but the patient died. You're used to that, though, doc."

His jest pleased him, and he played many variations upon the same phrase, to the point of weariness. Rotch, looking on at the game, watched the doctor with an amused smile, expecting an outbreak, seemed faintly disappointed when none came.

Between Rotch and the fat man a more acute antagonism was likewise developing. Wardle, by some sudden whim, had begun to devote himself to Julie, constituting himself her cavalier, dancing with her, protesting the high regard in which he held her, touching her hand, her shoulder, her arm at every occasion. Once, by way of casual jest, he kissed her while they danced. Between Rotch and his wife there was apparent only a mild affection; nevertheless to the man's besotted eyes, his vision distorted by the liquor he drank so steadily, Wardle's actions assumed more importance than they deserved, and he resented them. This feeling on his part revealed itself at first in small ways; but when on the third day chance put him and Wardle on the side veranda together and alone, Rotch spoke of the matter in forthright terms and bade Wardle mend his practices. Coxon, coming from the guides' cabin with some canned provisions, interrupted their colloquy, catching fragments of what Rotch said.

The old guide in fact missed little of what went on in the main camp. His position brought him to the big house all through the day. He helped Bruton serve the meals, and he and the other guides carried wood for the stoves in

each bedroom, and filled the water pitchers and made the beds. Pring had some talk with him about Wardle, finding relief in venting his irritation.

On the afternoon of the third day, restless with their long confinement indoors, they desired to shoot at targets on the long screened veranda on the east side of the house. This was so well sheltered by tall spruce trees and by the bulk of the main camp itself that it was free from snow except for a fringe around the outer rail. At the rear end a drift had heaped itself above the level of the veranda floor, spilling a little upon the boards beyond where the full-length windows of the bedroom occupied by Wardle and Doctor Moal opened outward.

Pring had abundance of ammunition and a store of paper targets, and Coxon prepared a rectangular frame on which the targets could be placed. They fired at first with one of the automatic pistols, then with the rifle which was equipped with a silencer. The arm was accurate, and at this short range, scarce fifteen yards, their scores were high. They used a standard twenty-yard target, the black spot divided into three rings and measuring slightly more than two inches in diameter. Most of the shots struck in the black, even those fired by Grace Taber. Carlotta did better than Grace, while Julie and her husband were about on a par. Pring was a fair shot, though not a remarkable one. But between Doctor Moal and Wardle a very definite and keen rivalry developed. Doctor Moal was accustomed to fire-arms; but Wardle declared that he had never fired a gun in his life, and the fact that he met the doctor on even terms gave him an excuse for loud and offensive exultation. Doctor Moal was at last goaded into a direct challenge.

"I'll just shoot you a group of twenty shots," he volunteered, "and bet you a hundred I beat you."

Wardle hemmed and hawed.

"Well, of course, I'm only a beginner, doc," he declared. "But I'll try you once."

The match was made, the shots were fired. Wardle shot first, at his own suggestion.

"So you'll know what you're up against," he explained.

Most of his shots were within the ten ring, the other all within or touching the nine. He was one of those men without nerves, full of self-confidence, with a natural steady hand and eye and an instinctive feeling for the trigger.

Yet Doctor Moal would normally have beaten him with ease at that range.

But the doctor was angry and his nerves were on edge. By a powerful effort at self-control he kept his first seven shots within the ten ring. Then a defective cartridge resulted in a keyholing bullet, which failed to touch the outer rim of the nines; and Wardle's whoop of delight completed the doctor's collapse. He failed miserably, and Wardle collected the wager on the spot, pointing the moral with complacent boasts.

Coxon had been at hand throughout the shooting, reloading the weapons and cleaning them out with a brush after every ten shots.

Pring, watching, remarked to him, "There were a lot of defectives in that bunch of cartridges, Coxon." The old guide nodded.

"That's right, sir," he agreed. "This is the last box of them. They misfire too often to suit me. I got a new lot in—another kind." He named the brand. "They're more reliable I believe."

As it happened, they wearied of the sport when that box of cartridges was expended, and went indoors to return to bridge. Pring and Carlotta, the doctor and Grace Taber played. Rotch appointed himself bartender and prepared cocktails. Julie went into the library to bury herself in a book which had interested her, and Wardle joined her there, grinning at Rotch over his shoulder as he did so. Coxon, cleaning the rifle in the gun room, caught a glimpse of Rotch's furious countenance as Wardle disappeared.

Later, during dinner, in the intervals of serving, Coxon, as his habit was, put the camp in order. In the library he discovered Julie's book on the big couch which barred the windows, and he returned it to its place upon the shelves. Back in the living room and silently observant, he saw that Wardle was bending toward Julie in a manner which fanned to fury the slow flame in her husband's bloodshot eyes. Grace Taber, across the table, watched them; and Coxon caught her off guard and saw such sudden and passionate anger in her countenance that he was impressed by the circumstance and could not forget it. When they had left the table, and while he cleared away the dishes, he saw Grace approach the fat man and draw him insistently aside for a low-toned conversation.

It was still snowing when Coxon and the cook left the main camp and returned to their cabin. The storm seemed to have reached its height, the mass of flakes which filled the air descended crushingly, and the footprints of the men were filled with snow as soon as they had passed. But an hour or two later the snow abruptly ceased; and when toward eleven o'clock Pring and Doctor Moal came out on the veranda for a breath of air before bed, they discovered this and conveyed the word to the others, who joined them to see how still and white the forest lay, and the wide expanse of the pond. Overhead, scudding clouds were crossing the vault of the sky; and where there were no clouds a few stars began to appear.

"There's a wind up there," Doctor Moal remarked, and Pring nodded assent.

"It will blow and drift now," he agreed; "and be colder too."

"Poor hunting."

"I'm afraid so. We can only wait and see."

Indoors again, Rotch announced that he was going to bed, and waited insistently till Julie should be ready to go with him. Doctor Moal said good night and turned into his room, which opened off the living room to the rear. Grace and Wardle were talking together in low voices by the mantel; and Pring and Carlotta waited, more or less patiently, for their guests to retire. Wardle at last ended the conversation with a word, bade his host and hostess good night in his usual loud and cordial tones, and went to join Doctor Moal. Grace fled upstairs with a nod; and Carlotta followed her, while Pring extinguished the lamps. A little later they were all abed.

Carlotta, unhappy and distressed by the friction which had marred the days just past, lay for a little while awake. She was glad the snow had stopped. Tomorrow there would be a chance to get out-of-doors; the accumulation of anger she hoped would then disappear. When by and by she slept, it was fitfully; and after what seemed to her only a moment she was awakened by a cry, a scream from somewhere outside the camp.

She sat up in bed, and discovered Pring at the door of their room, and she asked quickly, "You, Warren?"

"Yes."

"What was that?"

"A rabbit, I think. A mink, or an owl got it," he told her, and remained standing by the door.

She asked, "What are you doing?"

For a moment he did not reply; then he came back to his bed beside her and she noticed for the first time that he wore dressing gown and slippers.

"I heard someone come upstairs and go into Rotch's room," he told her. She thought his voice was hoarse and unnatural.

"I didn't hear anything," she objected. "Are you sure?"

He went toward the door again and opened it a crack and looked out.

"There's a light downstairs," he said, in something like a whisper.

"A light?"

"I'll go down and put it out," he told her, and went out into the hall, closing the door behind him. She noticed that the wind was rising, coming from a new direction, colder than it had been before; and she drew the coverlets close to her chin and waited for Warren to return. He did not come back at once, and minutes passed. At last, faintly uneasy, she got out of bed and without waiting to put on slippers or robe, went to the door and opened it.

Light shone up the stair well, and she went to the head of the stairs and called softly, "Are you coming, Warren?"

There was a perceptible pause before he answered.

"Not right away," he said. "You go back to bed."

"What is it?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

Another pause, and then his harsh and unnatural voice replied.

"It's Bill Wardle," he told her. "He's been shot. He's dead."

Chapter Five

CARLOTTA, at the head of the stair, heard her husband's announcement and stiffened where she stood; felt cold winds blowing across her body, felt her breath check and swell in her throat and her tongue thicken between her teeth. Then, with a swift movement like a run, she started down the stair, but as she did so was checked by another's voice below. The opening of a door and another's voice—the voice of Doctor Moal:

"What is it, Warren?"

She halted as she heard her husband's reply; halted and returned to her room to draw slippers on her bare feet and to slip her arms in to the sleeves of her dressing gown of warm, quilted silk with marabou at throat and elbows before going downstairs again.

From the stairs themselves she had a glimpse of her husband and Doctor Moal beside the great couch which stood before the wide hearth, and she saw that Doctor Moal bent above a huddled form there.

Then her husband came to meet her, and put his hands on her arms and said huskily, "Go back upstairs, Carlotta. There is no need of your coming down. Go back to bed."

She shook her head from side to side, groping for words.

"What has happened, Warren? What has happened?"

"Bill Wardle's killed," he replied, glancing over his shoulder. "He has been shot with a .22, right in the forehead. He is quite dead."

"But how?"

His eyes evaded hers, avoided the scrutiny she bent upon him; and she thought the muscles of his cheeks stiffened.

"Go back to bed, Carlotta."

"He didn't shoot himself."

"No; there's no chance of that." His tone was bitter.

"Who?"

"I beg of you to go back to bed," he insisted.

"I'm afraid. I can't be alone, Warren."

He hesitated and she thought his tone unnatural and strained. "Wake Julie," he suggested; and with his hands still on her arms, turned her and pushed her away from him. "Go on, Lotta."

Her eyes fixed on his countenance, sought to meet his, which were insistently averted; and suddenly, with a little cry of grief and terror, she ran away from him, up the stairs. In the upper hall she hesitated for a moment, looking toward Julie's door, then decided she preferred to be alone and went into her room and got into bed, huddling beneath the heavy coverings as though to hide from her own thoughts. Her voice and her husband's had been subdued and low; there was no need of awakening these their other guests.

In the living room below stairs Pring and Doctor Moal, old and tried friends, were left together with the body of the buffoon. Doctor Moal, with professional authority, had moved the body a little in order to examine the wound.

"Killed instantly," he murmured. "No doubt about that. What brought you down, Warren? Hear the shot?"

Pring hesitated for an instant; then he said "No," and shook his head. "No; but the wind started to rise a little and it rattled our door. I got up to stick a match into it to stop the noise. You know how a thing like that annoys you in the night. When I opened the door I saw there was a light down here." He checked himself, eyes momentarily thoughtful, then went on: "I thought I must have forgotten one of the lamps, so I came down to put it out."

"Find him just this way?" the doctor asked. Pring nodded.

"Yes, yes, sprawled across the couch almost as though he were praying. I thought he was asleep or drunk—I don't know what I thought—till I came on this side of him and saw his head."

"He must have been standing up," the other commented. "Must have tumbled right forward this way."

"Yes, yes." Pring was absorbed in his own reflections.

"Bad business," Doctor Moal remarked.

Pring said harshly, "I'm not wholly surprised. Sometimes he made me fairly insane with anger." The doctor studied his friend; and after a moment Pring became conscious of this scrutiny and asked, "What's the matter?"

"Somebody did this, you know," Moal replied.

Pring weighed this obvious fact.

"One of the guides," he suggested lamely.

"They had nothing against him."

"Let us see. There may be tracks."

He turned toward the kitchen, and Moal went with him to the back door from which the path, shoveled daily, led toward the cabin where the guides were housed. In this path snow had fallen after Coxon and Bruton left the main camp; their footprints were obliterated and the white surface showed no fresh traces. The two men stood in the door, a lifted lamp in Pring's hand, and made sure of this. Then they returned to the living room and stood in silence for a while.

"The doors here were all shut," Pring commented at last in a dull tone.

"Locked?" Moal asked, and Pring shook his head.

"Nothing is ever locked when we are here," he replied.

The two men faced each other steadily, the same thought in the eyes of each.

"Plain fact is then," Doctor Moal said baldly, "one of us here in the house did it."

"I did not hear the shot," Pring remarked.

"That rifle with the silencer, perhaps," Moal suggested; and after a reluctant pause Pring went toward the door of the gun room and put aside the heavy deerskin hangings. The door itself was closed. He opened it and went into the other room and took the light rifle from the rack, returning with it toward the lamp on the big table. The two inspected the weapon together.

"Coxon cleaned it, wiped it up before he put it away," Pring reminded his companion.

"Has it been fired?"

Pring ejected a shell, forcing the lock open, and held the weapon so that the lamplight was reflected into the barrel from the breech. At the same time he applied his eye to the muzzle.

"Yes," he said then. "Yes, it has been fired."

Doctor Moal took it from his hands and assured himself on this point.

"Right," he agreed; and he actuated the lever, closing the breech and replaced the ejected shell in the magazine. "Must have shot from the gunroom door then," he re-

marked. His tone was professionally calm, and Pring remarked this.

"This does not seem to disturb you," he said.

"I've seen gunshot wounds before," Doctor Moal replied, smiling faintly. "It's my profession to be undisturbed, you know."

"A damned mess, just the same," Pring commented. "Of course, I could do without Wardle. I know that's a rotten thing to say, but he annoyed me. But this will all be spread in the papers."

"Accidental shooting?" Doctor Moal suggested mildly, and Pring considered this for a moment.

"We might manage that," he agreed. "No one knows but Carlotta. But they will have to know. We can't hush it up too abruptly. We would have Coxon and the others talking. Coxon has a wise head. We'll see what he says." He started toward the kitchen.

"Might as well wait till morning," Doctor Moal reminded him. "There's nothing to be done now, and some idea may come to us."

Pring returned reluctantly.

"That means our sitting here the rest of the night."

"I could stand with a drink," the other declared.

"I, too," Pring agreed, and went to the cabinet.

He filled the glasses in silence and the two men drank with a meeting of the eyes, but without words. Then Pring stoked the fire, of which dying embers remained on the hearth, and put on fresh wood. The couch, standing as it did immediately before the hearth, thrust its grim burden into their midst; and the two looked at it for a moment, considering the situation.

Then Doctor Moal said, "After all, we've got to move him eventually. Help me lift him on the couch."

Pring agreed and moved forward; but at the last moment he drew back again.

"I am reluctant to touch him," he exclaimed. "It makes me ill to think of it."

Doctor Moal nodded understanding and himself managed the task. He went to his bedroom and returned with a blanket, which he drew across the body. Then they moved the couch to one side, out of their immediate presence, and set their chairs before the fire.

"A thing like this stuns one," Pring commented. "There's

a curious humming, a singing in my veins. I do not feel any particular emotion, only a great confusion. Is it the same with you?"

"Shock," the other explained. "Sensibilities are dulled by the magnitude of the moment. You'll feel all right in the morning. Of course, you're full of sleep now too."

"I couldn't sleep!"

The doctor surveyed his friend appraisingly. "Suppose I give you something to quiet you down. You're rather pale."

"You take it calmly enough."

"Probably I'm better used to controlling myself under similar circumstances."

"Another drink will do me," Pring decided. While he tilted the decanter he was reminded of Rotch. "We might get Bert down," he suggested. "He would drink with us, at least."

"Probably asleep," Doctor Moal replied. He diverted the conversation into this new channel. "You know, your friend Rotch drinks more than is good for him. I've been tempted to remonstrate. He hasn't been sober, in the strict sense, for four days, to my knowledge."

"Nor drunk, either," Pring amended.

"The halfway state is most dangerous," the doctor assured him. "It is apt to precipitate itself in a sort of madness. I've seen men, apparently perfectly good-humored, pass without any transitional phase into a perfect fury of rage and destruction."

"I don't believe Rotch shot him," Pring declared straightforwardly, answering the other's unspoken thought.

"I wouldn't suggest that," the other replied. "But after all, one of us did. Fairly safe to leave the girls out of it, I suppose. That narrows it down to us three." He smiled in a sardonic way. "If we eliminate Rotch, the matter becomes fairly personal between you and me."

Pring stared at him, his eyes perplexed. After a moment he said, half to himself, "I did hear someone come upstairs and go into Rotch's room."

"When?"

"A moment before I opened the door. Someone almost running."

Doctor Moal rose.

"Suppose we call Bert down?" But it was now Pring who objected.

"Wait till morning. After all, we're all in this together. I suppose, since I am host, the heaviest burden must fall on me. But we will get together, all of us; discuss it and see what's to be done. In the meanwhile, let us avoid the subject, Chet, till morning."

The other nodded, sat down again.

"You've the legal mind, I the medical," he commented. "You've an instinct for decency and order, mine is for diagnosis and remedy."

They sat for a little while in silence, and Pring filled a pipe which he took from the mantel. When it was lighted, he asked, "Did you hear the rabbit?"

"That thing that screamed in the thicket toward the lake? Yes. It woke me like a shot. That was when I discovered Wardle wasn't in bed."

Pring looked at him attentively.

"You didn't hear him get up?"

"No; he must have been mighty quiet about it. I sleep soundly, though." Pring nodded.

"I remember you do. Remember how we badgered you for snoring on that trip in the Rockies?"

"Guess I still snore," Doctor Moal agreed. "Wardle spoke of it."

"Yes, he would," Pring assented. "I'm surprised you didn't hear him get up, though. What brought him out here, do you suppose?"

"I suppose he wasn't sleepy. A book, perhaps."

"I did not see any book," Pring remarked. "And he liked his sleep too."

"Don't know," Moal admitted. "I hadn't thought of that side of it. It's astonishingly hard to go back of the face of things, in the first moment. A lot of questions will occur to us by daylight. Probably if we knew what brought him out here we'd have a lead."

They weighed this consideration in a long silence, and as time passed they relaxed in their chairs, lids half lowered, on the borders of sleep. But neither did sleep. Now and then one or the other, glancing toward his companion, discovered a glint of firelight from eyeballs half concealed under shadowing lashes. Once and then again Pring rose to feed the fire. Once Doctor Moal poured them each another drink. For the rest they were quiet, and the big camp about them slept as silently as the still form under the

blanket on the couch. Outside, all about for miles lay the deep and silent woods, insulating them against the contacts of the distant world, the society of mankind. Yet this matter that had chanced would concern that society, would focus its attention, would draw down upon the persons in the camp tonight insistent questionings and long curiosity.

Doctor Moal seized this thought and presently remarked, "Twenty years from now we'll be telling our grandchildren this tale."

"I'd give a deal to forget it."

"We'll have no opportunity," the doctor replied. "You'll always be the Pring at whose hunting camp Bill Wardle was murdered; I'll always be—Doctor Moal. 'You know, the one who shared the same bedroom with that chap Wardle that night he was killed.' "

"I suppose you're right."

"The public at large will forget in a month. But not our friends."

Silence embraced them again. The long hours of the night dragged away. The oil lamp burned low and Pring extinguished it and lighted another. After an eternity, against the tall windows toward the lake, he discovered a gray light that foretold the breaking up of the night. He shifted in his chair with grim relief.

"Soon be morning now," he said.

"It's colder," Doctor Moal commented. "We'd best build up the fire."

Chapter Six

OF the four woodsmen sleeping in their snug cabin behind the main camp, Coxon was that morning the first to awake. In other matters his years sat lightly upon this man; but like so many folks past middle life, a lesser quantity of sleep sufficed him and he habitually stayed late abroad and woke at earliest dawn. He awoke this morning before the windows of the cabin, sheltered as they were by surrounding trees, and masked by snow in the corners of the panes, revealed any indication that day was near. Awake, he lay a little while unstirring, and so presently decided, from the evidence of his nose, exposed through a cranny of the blankets drawn about his head, that it had grown much colder during the night. That would mean the main camp was cold and fires to greet waking guests would be most welcome there. Accordingly Coxon slid his feet to the floor beside his bunk and went to the stove in the end of the cabin and discovered, as he had guessed, that the fire had burned itself out. He made haste to kindle a fresh one, and the disturbance he made awoke his companions. Bullard and Newry, whose duties did not call them abroad so early, drew blankets more securely about their heads and continued their slumbers; but Jean Bruton, the excellent cook, pushed his cover aside and sat up on the edge of his bunk, hitching his suspenders over his shoulders.

"It's damn cold," he remarked, his broad face beaming.

"Sure is," Coxon agreed. "Must be ten below."

"Wind blew some in the night."

"I heard it. . . . You hear that rabbit yell? Come on to blow after that for a spell, but it died down 'for I got back to sleep."

"Yes, I heard the rabbit," Bruton agreed.

He was thrusting his feet into felt boots inside high rubbers, and now bent over to snap the catches of the rubbers.

Coxon had the fire roaring. He broke the ice in a pail by the stove and put water to heat, and when it began to steam he poured some in a basin and washed his hands and face. The men spoke little, each doing what needed to be done without direction. Coxon, first dressed, pulled his cap about his ears and went out of doors. The gray light of early morning was diffusing itself through the forest. The cold was almost palpable; the very air seemed full of crystal of frost. Now and then, somewhere near by, a tree snapped and cracked; but for the rest, silence blanketed the scene, almost as tangible as the thick carpet of snow which billowed all about.

Coxon's blood ran slow and sluggish, and he was glad to take a shovel from its place beside the cabin door and begin the task of clearing out the path to the main camp. Time enough to build fires there after a while; if he went too early he would wake those who liked to sleep late. The living room, on the front of the camp, was on the side away from him; he could not see the light from its windows. His shovel made the light, dry snow fly. During the preceding days snow thrown out of this path had built a high wall on one side, over which Coxon scarce could see. He deposited the snow he removed this morning on the other side of the trenchlike way he made. He worked steadily and his blood began to stir; his breath congealed in little frost crystals on his short mustache and on the collar of his coat, which he had turned up about his chin. The camp ahead of him seemed innocent of life as did the cabin behind; he might have thought himself alone in immense silence. Only from the chimney of the cabin, when he looked back, he saw a ribbon of smoke arising. The fire in the main camp had burned so low that it produced no smoke; but when Coxon was three-quarters of the way from cabin to camp, someone replenished this fire and the woodsman saw fresh smoke billow upward through the air, and he thought Pring must have come downstairs.

Bruton came along the path behind him with another shovel and Coxon gave way for a moment; then he followed on the cook's heels, clearing away the debris of soft and sliding snow left by the other. So they came to the kitchen door. Bruton cleared the lower steps, but Coxon checked him momentarily to point out that someone had opened the door and stood on the doorsill, looking out to-

ward their cabin. The tracks of the two men were visible in the fringe of snow upon the sill. Pring and Doctor Moal had stood here when they came to look for traces in the path to the cabin, and Coxon at once recognized the significance of the imprints.

"They came to look out or to call to us," he said. "I heard nothing, though."

The cook chuckled.

"They probably got cold—wanted fires built," he suggested.

"Something may be wrong," Coxon remarked, and opened the door and went into the kitchen. It was by this time sufficiently light so that he could see across the room; but it was also sufficiently dark so that the line of illumination under the door told him a lamp was lighted in the living room. He crossed at once and entered; and Pring and Doctor Moal, aroused by the sound of his coming, met him face to face.

The old woodsman looked from one of them to the other, tugging at his cap. They wore dressing gowns, since it had not yet occurred to either of them to change into warmer garments; their faces were haggard and their eyes were tired. Coxon pulled off his mittens and tucked them with his cap into his pockets.

"Morning," he said. Then he saw that the couch had been moved against the farther wall; that on it something lay. He took a step that way, paused to look again toward his employer. "What's happened?" he asked.

"Mr. Wardle has been shot," said Pring.

Bruton, in the doorway that led to the kitchen, uttered an ejaculation and his round face turned gray. But Coxon showed no sign of discomposure.

He asked directly, "An accident?"

Pring shook his head.

"It appears that someone shot him," he replied. Coxon nodded as though he were not surprised.

"That is bad."

"Yes."

The woodsman considered.

"The first thing," he said briefly, "is to look in the snow."

"What for?"

"To see whether anyone approached the camp. Could he have been shot from outside?"

"He was shot with the little rifle, the one with the silencer," Doctor Moal told Coxon.

"And the doors and windows were all shut when I found him," Pring added.

Coxon turned toward the kitchen again.

"I guess I'll look around anyway," he decided; and with no further word went out through the kitchen and plowed through the deep snow, making a complete circuit of the camp at a distance of twenty yards. The snow showed no mark, nor were there any drifts of sufficient size to have obliterated footprints made during the night. He returned to where the others waited and said passively, "No one came near."

Day was coming more swiftly. It was already so light that the lamp might have been extinguished; but its pleasant glow was agreeable to them all and no one made a move to put it out.

Coxon put fresh wood on the fire, and when he turned again it was to say, "He will have to be moved before breakfast." Pring nodded.

"We've got to eat in here. I don't suppose any of us could do it with that there."

Coxon looked at Doctor Moal.

"Maybe you wouldn't mind getting your things out," he suggested. "There's a room upstairs you can have. Then we can put the couch and all in your room. His things are there." Doctor Moal nodded assent.

"The wisest plan," he agreed, and turned toward the door of his bedroom. Coxon followed.

"I'll make a fire for you to dress by," he volunteered, and went into the room upon the other's heels and knelt before the little stove, crumpling birch bark and gathering a handful of spruce splits.

Doctor Moal was getting into his clothes, gathering his belongings without a word. Coxon rose, his task concluded, and glanced around the room. The rear windows were closed, as were those which led to the screened veranda at the side, where they had fired at targets the afternoon before.

"You sleep with the windows shut?" he asked.

Doctor Moal smiled and shook his head.

"No; no, I shut them when I got up. The wind was springing up and I thought it would blow snow in. It came from that side."

"Didn't anybody hear the shot, did they?"

"No. At least neither Mr. Pring nor I heard it. I heard a rabbit scream; that woke me, and then I noticed Wardle wasn't in bed. I got up and closed the windows and then I heard Mr. Pring in the living room, so I joined him."

"What time was that?" Coxon asked.

"After midnight, I should say."

"Right after the rabbit yelled that way?"

"Yes, within five minutes."

"You looked at Mr. Wardle, did you?"

"Yes," the doctor replied.

"How long since he was shot, do you think?"

"Not long; not ten minutes."

Coxon commented grimly, "He died just before the rabbit."

"I should think so."

The woodsman helped Doctor Moal remove his belongings to the living room and left them by the stair foot. Pring had waited their return, tilting on his heels before the hearth. In the kitchen, Bruton was busy, and he appeared now with a steaming pot of coffee in his hands.

They were glad to get it, and sipped at the scalding stuff, feeling it run through their bodies hearteningly. The occasional clash of pot or pan in the kitchen, to which Bruton had returned, had a reassuringly normal sound.

When they had drunk the coffee, Coxon said, "Let's move the couch now."

So, between them they did so, shifting the heavy piece with difficulty through the narrow doorway into the room Doctor Moal and Wardle had occupied together. The task done, Pring and the doctor returned to the living room; but Coxon stayed behind to remove the blanket and make some scrutiny of what lay beneath it. He marked a tiny smear of red on Wardle's right hand before he drew the folds of the dead man's dressing gown more securely about the still form.

Rejoining the others, the door closed behind him, he asked, "Didn't find him laid out that way, did you?"

Pring replied, "He was on his knees, sprawled across the couch, almost like a man praying."

"Like he'd fell?"

"I thought he must have been standing—must have pitched forward."

"Arms crumpled under him, I suppose."

Pring said, after a moment's hesitation, "I think so." But Doctor Moal amended this.

"Not when I first saw him."

"How were they?" Pring asked.

"His left hand was down along his side half under him; but his right arm was thrown out along the couch, full length, right angles to his body."

"You may be right," Pring assented. "It was a shock to me. I was disturbed."

"It's my profession to observe small things accurately, even under stress," Doctor Moal explained with a smile.

"Of course, of course," Pring agreed.

Coxon thought his tone was surprisingly hearty, perhaps not wholly sincere.

He asked his employer directly, "How'd you happen to come down and find him?"

"I got up to fix my door," Pring explained, with a glance at the doctor. "The wind was beginning to blow and it rattled. I meant to stick a match or a handkerchief in the crack. But when I opened it there was a light downstairs here. I could see it on the stairs. So I came down to put it out—and found him."

Coxon swept his eyes around the room.

"If he was standing facing the couch, the shot must have come from the library or the gun room."

"The rifle was in the gun room," Pring replied. "You cleaned it yesterday, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"It's been fired since."

"From the gun room then," Coxon decided thoughtfully. "Mr. Wardle couldn't have seen him in the dark there, even if he looked that way." He considered for a moment, then addressed Pring. "Did Mrs. Pring hear you get up?" Pring nodded.

"Yes, she knows. I made her go back to bed."

"You been up to see her?"

"I forgot about her, really. This thing has upset me."

"You better go up to her," Coxon suggested. "Get

dressed and all. I'll help Doctor Moal move his things upstairs. Want I should build the fire in your room?"

"I'll do that," Pring said.

Coxon nodded his assent and picked up Doctor Moal's bag. The three men went upstairs together, and Coxon saw Pring gently open the door of his own room and go inside. He went with Doctor Moal to the unused bedroom in the rear of the house and built a fire in that stove, and took the water pitcher to the kitchen to fill it and returned with fresh water for the physician's ablutions.

The woodsman asked no questions, made no remark; but Doctor Moal said idly, "An extraordinary situation, Coxon."

"Six of us here, all pretty intimate friends; and one of us a murderer."

"I don't see any other way to look at it."

"How will you notify the authorities?"

"I'll send two of the men out today, if Mr. Pring thinks best. They can make it by tomorrow noon; or maybe tonight if they travel late. Then if the telephone ain't down from the head of the lake, we can get someone in here in about four days."

"It will be rather ghastly to be penned up here, under the circumstances. No possible transportation out, is there?"

"No, I guess not. They'll bring in sledges, maybe, and snowshoes. The lake is all froze solid by now; but there's close two feet of soft snow on it unless a wind blows it clear."

Doctor Moal poured water into the bowl, and Coxon withdrew. It was his morning task to build fires in each room, and he went now to knock on Grace Taber's door. She told him to come in, her voice smothered and low; and when he did so she was invisible beneath a mound of bed-clothes. He built the fire without a word, filled the water pitcher and shut the door behind him, knocking next on the door of the room occupied by Rotch and Julie. It was Julie who bade him enter. Rotch seemed still asleep. Julie asked in a smothered voice whether it were not colder, and Coxon assented. There was a table between the beds, on which was set a lamp. Beside this lamp lay a book which Coxon recognized as the one Julie had been reading in the library the day before; but the lamp, instead of being drawn near her bed, was on the side toward that of her husband, so he

thought she had not read after retiring. When the fire was lighted, he went downstairs again.

Doctor Moal was in the living room, and Coxon, after a moment, asked, "What time did you all go to bed last night?"

"About eleven, I guess," the doctor replied.

"Everybody go right to sleep, I wonder? Sometimes Mrs. Rotch reads after she gets to bed. I've seen her light going. Did you notice her take a book upstairs?"

"I think I did," Doctor Moal replied, considered for a moment, then said positively, "Yes, I'm sure she did. She went into the library and got one."

"She maybe heard something," Coxon remarked. "We can see by and by."

Pring called from the upper hall and the woodsman went to see what was wanted. His employer said in a low voice, "Coxon, Mrs. Pring is ill. I should not have left her alone. Will you fix up a hot drink for her, a hot towel—something of the kind?"

"All right," Coxon assented, and went downstairs and into the kitchen.

When he came back into the living room again Grace Taber had joined Doctor Moal there; and Coxon was faintly surprised at this, since she was usually the last of the party to come downstairs.

Doctor Moal must have told her what had happened, for she had fallen into a chair, pale as death. The doctor ran upstairs ahead of Pring.

"She needs a stimulant," he explained. "I'm getting some strychnia."

She had been, Coxon remembered as he went upstairs, fond of Wardle, for all the dead man's unattractive qualities; he felt a sorrowful regret and pity. Then he knocked on the door of Pring's bedroom and Pring called to him to come in. Coxon found him fully dressed. Mrs. Pring lay in bed, her eyes closed, her cheeks pale, her lips twitching. Coxon looked at her compassionately. She had long ago enlisted his affections and his devotion; he felt himself her man—had once or twice gone so far as to blame Pring for the lack of tenderness between them. He saw Pring bend over her now with the hot drink and lift her with an arm beneath her shoulders.

Her eyes opened and met those of her husband, and she

trembled shudderingly and averted her eyes even while she drank from the cup he offered.

The woodsman withdrew and went down to set the table for breakfast.

But he could not forget how Carlotta had shuddered when she met her husband's eyes.

Chapter Seven

THE members of the party gathered for breakfast one by one. Doctor Moal was with Grace Taber in the living room when Coxon came downstairs, and while the old woodsman arranged plates and knives and forks he listened to their conversation. Grace said that she had been awakened, as had the others, by the scream of that miserable rabbit, untimely taken off by some marauder in the still silence of the night.

"I heard, just after that, someone moving around; and I even heard some talking. But I was so sleepy; it made no impression on me at all." She had been sound asleep before the rabbit disturbed her, she told the physician. "I was tired when I went upstairs," she explained. "It took me no time at all to get into bed—and asleep."

She was quite evidently in great distress, and the guide noticed that she avoided meeting her companion's eyes; that her cheeks were alternately flushed and pale. Her attachment for Wardle, obvious enough during the preceding days, might well account for this state of mind; yet he thought it was faintly surprising that she displayed no particular grief.

He had not expected grief from the others; their distaste for the fat man's company had been too evident. But he thought she had displayed unmistakable evidences of a deeper feeling, and her present manner puzzled him.

Pring came downstairs presently and said to Coxon, "We won't wait for Mrs. Pring. She's in rather bad shape—terribly upset. I expect she will stay abed for a while."

"I'll take her a cup of coffee," Coxon suggested, and the other agreed.

"She'll be glad to have it, I am sure," he said. Added as an afterthought, "But I would not talk to her about what has happened."

"Can I do anything for her?" Grace asked uncertainly, and Pring shook his head.

"It is just the shock," he replied gravely. "She needs rest."

"It's a terrible thing," Grace commented uncertainly. "Haven't you any idea at all how it happened?"

Pring shook his head, smiling mirthlessly.

"I've very few ideas of any kind this morning," he replied.

Julie Rotch came downstairs. Coxon had said nothing to her, when he built the fire in her room, about the tragedy of the night; she had had no warning. Yet the countenance of the three persons waiting in the big living room must have told her at once that something had occurred, because she stopped on the bottom stair and looked from one of them to the other in perplexity, and at last asked, "Whatever's the matter with you all?"

Doctor Moal flipped his cigarette into the fireplace; Pring hesitated; and it was Grace Taber who said in a voice edged with hysteria, "Bill's dead. Somebody shot him—in the night."

Julie met the other woman's eyes, her own flickering and unsteady.

"Shot him?"

"Yes."

"Murdered him?" Her voice was curiously toneless, expressing not even surprise, rather as though she said what must be expected of her, Coxon thought.

Pring stepped slowly toward her and said in a steady voice, "Yes, Julie. And we're all in it together, I suppose. It's shaken us up pretty well. Where's Bert?"

Julie said awkwardly, "He has a terrible head, but he's coming if he ever gets his shoes tied." Pring smiled.

"Does he need any help?" Julie shook her head unsympathetically.

"He'll manage it," she replied. Her eyes were searching the room and Coxon thought she expected to discover Warde's body somewhere.

Doctor Moal read her mind and said quietly, "He's in there, Julie."

She stared at the closed door of the bedroom. The silence became oppressive, and abruptly she laughed and exclaimed, "Well, you all act as though you thought I did it. Goodness knows, Bill was obnoxious! I oughtn't to say that though. Give me a drink, will you, Warren? This has got to me."

"Did you not hear anything?" Pring asked as he took up one of the decanters.

"Slept like a top all night except once. Something yelled out in the woods. That woke me for a minute, but not for long."

"Whoever it was, used the rifle with the silencer," Pring told her, and handed her a glass.

While she lifted it to her lips, Rotch came uncertainly down the stairs, and caught sight of his wife and saw what she did and said in a good-humored voice, "That's my dose too. Fill 'em up again, Warren, old man."

Coxon went into the kitchen to bring in the victuals, since, save for Carlotta, they were now all gathered about the table. When he returned with a platter of bacon and eggs they were telling Rotch what had occurred. Julie had disappeared; but a moment later she came out of the library and joined them again, no one but Coxon remarking her momentary absence. Rotch took the tale of the tragedy in a fashion faintly surprising.

He lighted a cigarette, puffed a cloud of smoke into the air and said cynically, "Well, I move we vote the chap a medal of honor."

"Bill?" Grace Taber asked, and Rotch shook his head with a smile.

"That's atrocious, Bert," his wife told him.

He looked at her in a fashion mildly truculent.

"Why be hypocritical? We all hated the man. Why pretend we're mourning now?"

Pring asked quietly, "I don't suppose you know anything about it?" And Rotch met his eyes for a moment and then laughed.

"That's right," he agreed. "We're all under suspicion, aren't we? I suppose the guides are out of it."

"There were no tracks in the snow," Pring replied. "It was someone in the house."

Rotch laughed maliciously.

"I can see this is going to be a merry party," he commented. "Where's Carlotta?"

"She's badly broken up," Pring told him. "She is not coming down."

"Ought to be here," the other urged. "Whoever's absent must expect the others to talk about them. I shall stick with the crowd or you'll be mutually agreeing to pin it on me."

"Bert slept through it all," Julie volunteered. "He didn't even hear the rabbit. Just lay there and snored."

Coxon said, "Breakfast's ready."

They took their places; Julie, at Pring's suggestion, taking the foot of the table to pour the coffee. Coxon brought her a cup to fill for Carlotta, and with this and a slice of toast and a little marmalade on a tray, he went up to knock at Mrs. Pring's door. She bade him enter, and he put the tray on the table beside her bed. She lay supine, her eyes fastened upon him; and he waited for a moment, expecting she might question him. She did in fact ask, "Are they at breakfast, Coxon?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"What do they say?"

Coxon smiled uncertainly.

"Not much yet, ma'am," he said. "Mr. Rotch didn't even wake up in the night. The others woke up, but none of them knew anything about it except Mr. Pring and Doctor Moal. The doctor heard Mr. Pring moving about and came out and sat with him till morning."

"How can they eat there?" she asked faintly.

"We put Mr. Wardle into his bedroom," Coxon explained. "I moved Doctor Moal upstairs."

She nodded faint assent.

"What are we going to do, Coxon?" she asked.

"Why, I figured on sending Bullard and Newry out today, ma'am," he replied. "They can bring help. While they're gone, we can see what we can find out. I feel kind of responsible. I'm in charge, in a way, and that gives me a sort of responsibility. I thought they'd all maybe let me ask them some questions. Me being on the outside, I can look on it evenner, kind of."

"Why do we have to?" She hesitated. "It might have been just an accident, Coxon. We might all say it was."

"You can't keep a thing like this," he urged.

"I suppose not."

He hesitated, then asked quietly, "You didn't happen to be awake, did you?"

"I woke up," she replied.

"What woke you?"

"Was it a rabbit?"

"I guess it was, ma'am. Did Mr. Pring wake at the same time?"

Her eyes darted toward him and away again.

"Why, no," she confessed. "No, he was at the door when I woke. Putting matches in the crack to keep it from rattling, he said."

"In his pajamas?"

"No, he had on his dressing gown and slippers, I think."

"How'd he happen to go downstairs?"

She hesitated uncertainly.

"It probably didn't mean anything," she replied. "But he heard someone come upstairs and go into the room opposite."

"Mr. Rotch's room?"

"Yes."

He lowered his eyes for a moment.

"He didn't tell me that," he murmured; then looked at her and asked, "Did you hear it too?"

She replied, almost reluctantly, "I—I don't think so, Coxon." Her eyes met his, but he saw in their depths a wavering, a tremulous movement as though they wished to turn away and hide; and her hand upon the coverlet trembled.

He questioned her no further; said gently, "You eat a bite and drink something, ma'am, and you'll feel better." And so withdrew.

Outside her door in the hall he paused, considering not only what her words had said but that which he had half seen in her eyes. From below stairs came the murmur of the voices of the others. They did not need him, and it was a part of his duties to put the bedrooms in order. He proceeded to do so, working expertly and swiftly. In Julie's room he became conscious of something amiss—something that was trying to reveal itself to him; and he stood for a space, looking all around, wondering what this was. Understanding came at last. The book which he had seen on her bedside table was no longer there; it was not, so far as he could discover, in the room at all.

With this circumstance foremost in his thoughts, he started downstairs. On the solid wall at the right of the stair, and near the foot, there hung a panel upon which was mounted an enormous lake trout which Pring had taken some years before. Coxon noticed absently that this panel was awry, a little out of line, and he touched it to straighten it. It should have rubbed against the wall, but something muffled the contact, and Coxon pulled the panel a little away from

the boards. A bit of white fell to his feet. A handkerchief; one of those small and fragile things which women carry in their hands. He stooped and picked it up and pocketed it. As he did so he glanced at the party around the table and saw that Pring was watching him intently. The others paid him no heed. Coxon ignored the regard of his employer, descended the last step or two and turned into the gun room at the foot of the stairs.

In this room, he reminded himself, the murderer had stood. There in the rack was the weapon he had used. Without touching it, Coxon examined it closely. It had been wiped yesterday afternoon with the oiled cloth which lay at the end of the rack for such purposes, but Doctor Moal and Pring had handled it since then. Pring had told him the barrel showed evidence that it had been fired; and Coxon made a mental memorandum to clean it presently so that the steel might not be pitted by the stale powder. He stood still for a moment, considering, his eyes moving to and fro. On the table in the middle of the room there was a cigar box into which the day before he had dropped the discharged cartridges which he picked up from the porch floor. He went to this box now and bent over it, stirring its contents with a gingerly finger. After a somewhat extended search, he found that which he sought and lifted it gingerly and slipped it into his pocket.

This done, the man stood still for a moment, considering what should next be done. The French doors opening on the veranda caught his eye. These doors could be secured on the inside with a bolt; but when the camp was occupied, this bolt was never drawn. A latch, with handles both outside and inside, ordinarily held them closed or permitted them to be opened. Coxon moved that way and turned the latch and stepped out on the screened veranda. To his right similar tall windows opened into the library, and beyond, other windows gave access to the room Wardle and Doctor Moal had occupied. But between, snow had drifted in a thin sheet, an inch or so in thickness. It was innocent of tracks, convincing Coxon that no one could have come to the gun room this way.

Nevertheless, the guide, with some obscure thought in his mind, stepped back into the gun room and got a screw driver from the drawer of the table. With this he unscrewed and removed the handle of the latch which secured the windows

of the gun room. This he put in his pocket with his other discoveries.

No further measure occurred to him, and he went back into the gun room and closed the door behind him. He re-entered the living room, to find the party still about the table, no longer eating, but smoking and talking in constrained tones about what had occurred. Coxon took the opportunity to go into the small library. A single glance showed him, in its place on the shelves, the book he had seen that morning on Julie's table; and he nodded as though he had anticipated this discovery.

The same moment Pring called, summoning him; and Coxon went back into the other room and stood facing them all, a square and ready figure of a man, his wise eye surveying them. The attitudes of the persons about the table were characteristic. Rotch sat on one side, amused and cynically smiling. Doctor Moal, serious and grave, watched Coxon and waited for Pring to speak. Grace Taber was pale and ill at ease; and Julie—though she, too, smiled and spoke lightly—was, Coxon thought, under a severe nervous strain. Pring, who felt upon himself the responsibility for what had occurred, revealed this burden in the gravity which filled his eyes. He had called Coxon now to consult with him.

"We've been talking this over, Coxon," he said carefully. "I'd be glad of your opinion."

"It's too early to have one," Coxon replied.

"I do not so much mean your opinion about what has happened. I mean your opinion as to what we should do." Coxon nodded.

"You might say what you think, sir."

"Is it possible to cover this up, Coxon?" Pring inquired. "Are your men here to be trusted? This might have been an accident, you know. Such things have happened. We are a long way from the outside world. What do you think?"

Coxon considered for a moment.

"If it was an accident," he suggested, "he didn't shoot himself. No powder marks on his face. Somebody shot him, just the same."

Pring hesitated; the others made faint movements of dismay.

"I should feel it my part," said the host at last, "to assume that onus."

"Say you shot him accidentally?"

"Yes."

"There'd still be questions."

Pring looked at his guests.

"My friends would support my story." Coxon slowly shook his head.

"Too many know this, sir," he said. "It would get about. You're too old a man to shoot a man right between the eyes by accident. People would smile at the idea, even if they couldn't prove anything. Then the true tale would get about; and then all of you here would have to go through the world with that said behind your back; that a man was killed here and maybe one of you killed him. I don't believe in it, sir."

Rotch said smilingly, "One of us did kill him, my friend. Behold! One of us five persons. We may safely eliminate Carlotta. They say a murderer wears a mark upon his forehead. Do you discover that mark here, my good Coxon?"

Coxon replied, "I shouldn't drink so much today if I were you, Mr. Rotch. We'll need clear heads."

Julie laughed with delight.

"One for you, Bert!" And Rotch also smiled, but without mirth. His eyes rested upon Coxon in an unfriendly way.

Doctor Moal spoke.

"What is your suggestion then?" he inquired.

"Well," said Coxon, "my idea is to do the regular thing. We can't get away from here very well—not all of us. The lake's solid, and there aren't snowshoes to go around. I'd figured to send Bullard and Newry out to tell what's happened; let them bring in sledges and the like to take the rest of us out. They could get word to the sheriff too."

"That sounds brutally businesslike," Rotch commented lightly.

Coxon looked at him and said, "You'd best remember, Mr. Rotch, that a man's been murdered here; and someone did it; and it's our job, in a way, to find out who it was."

There was a momentary pause; then Pring said with a movement of decision, "I'm afraid you're right, Coxon. You'd better get the men started right away."

"All right," Coxon assented. He moved at once toward the kitchen. Pring faced his guests.

"I suppose the best thing for us to do in the meantime," he suggested, "is to canvass the situation; see if by putting

our heads together we can find any lead." Rotch grinned again.

"Always remembering," he reminded them, "that one of us is a murderer and knows it. Could any fact endear us to one another any more than that?"

Coxon closed the door behind him and heard no more.

Chapter Eight

BULLARD and Newry had come to the kitchen of the main camp for breakfast, and Coxon found them there when he left the others in the living room; but he was unwilling to be overheard in that which he had to say to them; so he waited till they were through eating and then led them out and along the trenchlike path through the deep snow to the cabin the four woodsmen occupied. Bruton, the cook, stayed behind to attend to his own matters.

Bruton had told the two guides as much as he knew of what had happened. Coxon told them the rest.

"Now someone has to go out and send word," he said decisively. "Maybe the lake is closed up, and maybe the telephone's down out there too. If it is, you'll have to go around the shore and down to the railroad—one of you, anyhow. It's better than twenty miles to the hotel, the way you'll have to go. I want you should follow the telephone line and mend it if you can. It's broken somewhere. Better get the sheriff to come back with you. You can come around by the old road then with sleds. The women will have to ride out, and there's the stuff to be hauled."

They were all full of questions, even while they began swift preparations to start. He could only tell them as much as he knew: that Wardle had been killed and that—since the snow showed no tracks—someone within the main camp had killed him.

Newry commented shrewdly, "They'll be a nervous bunch, time we get back."

Coxon nodded and said in a sober tone, "They will that, Mrs. Pring is upset already; and I'm expecting the other women to go into hysterics any minute."

Bullard asked stupidly, "Who done it, Bob?"

Coxon shook his head.

"If I knew, I'd have him tied up by this time. When a man's done one killing there's nothing to stop him from doing more."

"Got an idea, haven't you?" Newry inquired.

And Coxon said frankly, "Not any. Only I don't figure it was one of the women; but it might have been. And I guess it wasn't Doctor Moal."

"Why not him?"

"Whoever did it must have come downstairs—to get into the gun room," Coxon explained. "The doctor might have come along the porch, I thought; but there was snow there and it didn't show any tracks. He couldn't very well have gone clear across the living room from his door to the gun room without Wardle's seeing him."

"Maybe Wardle did see him," Newry suggested. "Maybe they were talking together. What was Wardle doing in the living room, anyhow?"

Coxon's eyes narrowed a little.

"That's right," he agreed mildly. "That's right. I've got to find that out too. What fetched him out there?"

The men were ready, their preparations complete. Coxon reminded them to go to the kitchen and get a lunch to eat on the way. They had been abroad on snowshoes the day before and the webs were on the cabin porch. These under their arms, they went to the kitchen door and got packets of lunch from Bruton, and so set off around the camp, locating the telephone wire where it ran from a corner of the building to a near-by spruce tree, and with this as their guide began their journey. Coxon watched them out of sight; and when he turned toward the camp again it was to discover the others at the windows, also watching. He went slowly back to join them.

This old woodsman was not a man to evade responsibility. It seemed to him that in this emergency his duty was clear. He was not only the head guide, and therefore in somewhat the same position as that of skipper of a ship at sea; but also he was, like the other guides, in some degree charged with the enforcement of law. He was an old man and a wise one, dispassionate and just; and he was quite ready to act within the broad limits of his authority.

An aspect of the situation which had occurred to him during his talk with Bullard and Newry returned to his mind now. He had said that a man who had once killed may kill again. It seemed to him this was a very definite peril; and when he went back into the living room and encountered the eyes of the five persons gathered there—since Carlotta

was still in her room—this consideration was foremost in his mind. Nevertheless he did not at once speak of it; simply reported, "Well, I've started them off."

Pring asked, "How long will it take them, Coxon?"

"They figured to make it to the head of the lake sometime tonight. Then it depends whether the telephone is down from there on."

"They'll hardly get back tomorrow."

"If they come next day I'll be satisfied," Coxon replied.

Pring nodded, and Grace Taber said in a nervous voice, "Three days! How terrible!"

Rotch grinned at her.

"On the contrary," he urged, "I find the whole affair most amusing. Do you realize its full piquancy? Look about you. You are in the presence of a murderer. All of us are very busy at this moment in an absorbing guessing game. I find it infinitely more entertaining than bridge."

Grace laughed in a curiously high-pitched fashion, Coxon gravely regarding her.

"I can't believe it's true!" she cried.

Rotch seized upon this idea.

"There's a suggestion," he exclaimed, and turned to Pring. "Confess, now, my friend. Is not this all a colossal jest? One of the good Wardle's practical jokes? I incline to think that he is in the next room listening and chuckling in his amiable fashion."

Pring said impatiently, "Don't be a gruesome fool, Rotch."

"You give me your word?"

"Go look for yourself," the other challenged.

Rotch glanced toward the closed door, and Coxon saw his pallid face turn gray. He shook his head.

"I've no curiosity in such matters," he confessed, and moved toward the table where the decanter stood. "I shall take your word."

Doctor Moal, who had listened with an unmoved countenance, said quietly, "I can vouch for it, Bert, if you require corroboration. I assure you our friend is perfectly dead."

"Your professional reputation?"

"Quite so."

Rotch had gulped his drink.

"That reminds me," he said, a sudden edge in his tone. "Our former friend was inclined to make light of that professional reputation of yours, Chet."

"He made light of most things," the physician replied assentingly.

"You didn't take it so calmly at the time," Rotch insisted, and Doctor Moal seemed to perceive something beneath the casual remark and swung to face the other. Their eyes met and for an instant held; then Rotch laughed and looked away and poured another drink. With this in his hand, he turned and stood at one end of the mantel, facing Julie at the other end. She watched him steadily, and with a fixity which he seemed to find discomfiting. He endured this for a space, then swung around to face the room again, looking from one to another. Doctor Moal had taken a chair before the fire; Pring stood by one of the windows looking out toward the pond; and Grace Taber moved uncertainly to and fro as though unable to be still. Only Coxon presented a normal mien as he busied himself with some small task about the sideboard.

Rotch fixed his gaze on the old woodsman and raised his voice and said, "I say, Coxon, what do you think of all this?"

Coxon continued his task for an instant, then looked toward Rotch and toward Pring, who had turned to face him.

"I think it's no matter for joking," he said quietly.

"Pshaw!" Rotch insisted. "If we don't laugh we'll go insane. You'll have a lot of madmen on your hands." His countenance twisted in sudden bitterness. "This is a rotten business for a fact. Cooped up here by this infernal snow, with a dead man in the next room." His voice rose. "One of us killed him. You, Warren; or you, doctor—or me—or one of the girls. That's a fine thing to keep thinking about, isn't it? Pring, this is a fine party of yours." His outburst ended; the silence protracted itself, and at length he laughed and added, "Just the same, we'll all be famous for it. This is one of the little matters you never live down. Chances are the murderer won't be found out. Imagine that for yourselves. Or if he is, there'll always be some who won't believe. Every one of us will be under suspicion for the rest of our lives."

Silence again, unbearably protracted. Julie, resting her elbow on the mantel, stared into the fire. Grace had come to stand at her back, and her fingers fumbled together nervously. Rotch lighted a cigarette, breaking two matches in the process. Doctor Moal watched him with a professional eye, foreseeing the inevitable collapse toward which the other

was tending. Pring was the first to move. He left the window and came toward the fire and sat down, feet outstretched before him, resting his head wearily against the back of the chair. It was Coxon who at length broke this long silence.

He said quietly, "Mr. Rotch is quite right in what he says. We've got to find out what happened here last night."

Rotch laughed; but Pring looked at the old woodsman with some attention.

"Have you any idea, Coxon?" he asked.

"A good many," Coxon replied frankly. "Yes, sir, I've a good many. You see, I can look at it more clearly because I'm on the outside. It was someone in the house—some one of you—or Mrs. Pring. We've got to think of everybody. But the snow shows it wasn't me, nor any one of the other guides. So I can look at it maybe in a more level-headed way. Then, I'm an older man too."

He hesitated, and Pring said, "That's true, Coxon. And I have a very definite respect for your judgment. What do you propose?"

"Well, sir," Coxon replied, "there's one thing plain. A man's been killed here, and someone did it. Whoever did it has to keep the secret—his secret or her secret—or they're done for. When a person has once done a killing like this one—it was cold-blooded, sir, and deliberate, as you can see—then there's nothing that person is going to stop at afterward."

"I see your point," Pring said judicially. "You think he may kill again?"

Julie uttered a low exclamation, fixed her glance on Pring.

"That's it, Mr. Pring," Coxon replied. "If there's a chance of our finding out, why shouldn't he? He's no worse off if he kills us all—maybe better. He'd stand a better chance if he killed us all and got away than if he stayed here after we knew he did it. Or if he thought one of us knew, why shouldn't he kill that one?"

Pring said in a low tone, "Go on." The others listened with fixed attention.

"It leads up to this," Coxon explained. "I think I ought to take all the guns and the sheath knives and everything like a weapon in the house, and take them back to my cabin and lock them up there."

Pring considered this at length, his eyes upon the fire. Julie broke the silence, crying, "I think that's so wise!"

Oh, I think that ought to be done!" Her voice trembled so that they all looked at her, sensing something behind her words. Under their gaze she flushed scarlet, collected herself. "I think Mr. Coxon's right," she repeated in a steadier tone.

Rotch grumbled, "Far as I'm concerned, I'd feel a lot safer with a gun under my pillow."

"If you kept one, the others ought to," Coxon argued. "Then the first thing we know, someone will wake up in the middle of the night and hear something, or see something, and shoot without looking, just out of nervousness. We don't want that. It's bad already."

"I hardly think lack of a weapon would deter the murderer if he wished to kill another of us," Pring suggested.

"It would make it harder for him," Coxon retorted. "Why, Mr. Pring, a man used to a gun could stand in the gun-room door there and kill every one of us before we could make a move!"

Pring considered this for an instant, then rose decisively.

"I'm not sure you're right, Coxon," he said. "But I am going to rely on your judgment. Do you need any help?"

"You've got a shotgun in your room," Coxon replied. "I wish you'd bring it. And the others the same. And knives."

Silence again; one of those intervals when each man watches his neighbor, waiting to see another yield before himself surrendering.

Then Grace said, "I've nothing in my room," and Pring at once started toward the stair.

"I'll get my gun," he promised.

Doctor Moal rose, dusting cigarette ashes from his knee.

"I've a knife upstairs," he said. "I'll bring it down."

Julie turned toward her husband.

"Get my little pistol out of my bag," she directed: and Rotch, after a moment's hesitation, sullenly obeyed.

Coxon went to the door of the kitchen and called Bruton, and the two men turned toward the gun room, where Coxon collected the weapons. He took rifles and shotguns from the racks, pistols from the cabinet drawers, and loaded them all into Bruton's arms with instructions. One pistol, the target weapon with a broken firing pin, he left behind, in its case in an upper drawer. It was useless; he thought it might serve a purpose to leave the thing there. Back in the living room he received the contributions of the others and saw Bruton depart with them.

Rotch, watching the process, said with a grin, "Like holding court in Kentucky in feud time. Leave your pistols at the door, gentlemen."

Grace Taber asked Pring, "Is Carlotta better?"

"She's dressing," Pring replied. "She'll be down soon."

"All little playmates together," Rotch commented.

Pring, who had resumed his seat, said now, "Another thing occurs to me. You know, this matter will eventually come to the courts, at an inquest if not at a trial. We'll want to remember every detail of what has happened. I suggest we each write out all we can remember, of the time since we met, and the trip up here, and anything we heard or saw last night. It will make it easier later on."

They considered this without replying for a little; then Rotch said, "Nothing for me to write. I slept all night."

Doctor Moal took the other view.

"A good plan, Warren," he approved.

"I think so," Pring agreed. He smiled faintly. "Incidentally, it will give us something to do, a way to occupy our minds."

"Why don't we all play solitaire?" Rotch asked sardonically. "I'd suggest bridge, but that would be too hazardous if one knew one's partner might be a murderer, ready to practice his trade if you made a misplay."

Pring ignored him, appealing to Coxon.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

Coxon hesitated for a moment; then he said, "It ought to be done—while the thing is fresh in your minds. But, Mr. Pring, I've a question or two I'd like to ask first. They'll maybe clear up some of this."

"What are the questions?" Pring inquired in level tones, the others all attention.

"Well," Coxon replied, "one thing is this: Wardle was supposed to be in bed, but he wasn't. Something made him come out here. Now what I want to know is, What was he out here for? If we knew that, we could maybe get somewhere."

Pring said slowly, "I don't know, Coxon." He glanced at the others. "Does anyone?"

There was no reply.

"That's not the way to ask it," Coxon said. "Anyone who did know wouldn't dare say for fear the others would think there was more than was told. I thought I'd like to talk to

each one of you, by myself—maybe find out something; and anyway, it would do no harm.” He saw the reluctance in their eyes and his mild tones hardened. “You see, Mr. Pring,” he explained, “up here in the woods the game wardens and guides like me are about the only policemen there are. It gives me some authority, if I want to take it. I think I ought to go this far. I think I ought to have a chance to talk to every one of you, one after the other—alone.”

Doctor Moal said approvingly, “I believe that’s a wise plan, Warren. It could do no harm, and might lead to something.”

“I’d be glad to answer any questions,” Pring said frankly. “You can start with me, Coxon, if that suits you.” Coxon nodded.

“While the others go upstairs,” he suggested. “They can be writing out what they remember, as much as they remember, while I’m talking to you.”

Again that long, considering silence fell. Doctor Moal got to his feet, as did Pring. Then Grace Taber suddenly fled across the room and up the stairs. Julie, by this movement, was roused from her rigid absorption, and she touched her husband’s arm.

“Bert, come along,” she said quietly.

“I’m beginning to think I killed him myself,” Rotch exclaimed angrily.

Nevertheless, he went with her, and Doctor Moal followed them. Coxon and Pring were left alone.

Pring said quietly, “Suppose we go into the library.”

“It’s cold there,” Coxon suggested. “But that’s the best place. I’ll start a fire.”

Pring nodded and began to move nervously about the room. Coxon went to the kitchen for kindling and Bruton returned with him and sat down before the fire.

“Just to make sure no one else hears us,” Coxon explained in a matter-of-fact tone, and Pring faintly smiled.

The fire was quickly started; the small stove radiated heat. Coxon was busy arranging the drafts and Pring sat down upon the wide seat against the window. When the fire was burning to his satisfaction, Coxon straightened and began to fill his pipe.

“You know why Mrs. Pring is upset, don’t you?” he asked, whittling a slice from his black plug.

Pring looked mildly surprised.

"It's enough to upset her, I should think," he suggested.

Coxon looked at him squarely.

"She thinks you killed Wardle," he explained.

Chapter Nine

PRING was a trial lawyer of ability and reputation, and while Coxon was building the fire in the stove, he had found himself faintly interested in anticipating what was to be in effect a cross-examination, with himself as the witness. It did not occur to him as remarkable that the old woodsman should question him; there was an intangible authority in Coxon's bearing which seemed to justify his proceedings. Pring did not even look upon the approaching interview as a mere conversation between employer and employe. It was true that Coxon was in his pay; but it was also true that in their woods contacts, Coxon had usually commanded while Pring obeyed. So Pring now yielded himself to the other, awaiting his beginning with interest and curiosity.

Coxon's abrupt opening, his direct statement that Mrs. Pring suspected her husband of the murder that had been done, first startled, then angered the other man. His countenance became suffused with blood while from his lips the color seemed to drain away. It almost seemed to Coxon, steadily regarding him, that the man's closely cropped hair bristled and rose like the hair upon the back of a belligerent dog. Nevertheless, the guide held his ground, quite undismayed. Overhead, he could hear Rotch and Julie moving about in their room. For the rest, all within the house was silence; while outside, the deep blanket of snow lay white and still, muffling all the world. To an imaginative person their situation must have seemed incredibly remote from contact with their fellows, hemmed in and isolated by this snow. But to Coxon the forest was his familiar home, while Pring was too furiously angry to consider any matter save what Coxon had said.

Yet furious though he was, he managed a grim smile, as though faintly amused, and said slowly, "Do you ever go to court, Coxon?"

"I have been, yes."

"It is an old trick," Pring remarked, "to seek to anger a witness by your first question."

Coxon hesitated, his eyes wavering. Then he said slowly, "I didn't aim at that, Mr. Pring. You see, it's like this: If you didn't do this thing, you know it. But I don't know it, and nobody else knows it, except the one who did it. I just wanted you to see that people might think you did it. And I meant what I said too. Mrs. Pring does kind of think so."

Pring controlled himself; his voice was amiable.

"Why do you think that? Why do you pretend to read her thoughts?"

"I can usually figure about what a person thinks if I have anything at all to go by. You can take my word for it, she does."

Pring looked thoughtful. "I have seen she was more disturbed than was normal, and she did seem to want me to leave her," he remarked.

Coxon nodded, and he sat down in a chair by the stove and said casually, "I want you to tell me some things, Mr. Pring. What about last night? Go over it again. Start right from the beginning."

"What do you call the beginning?"

"The beginning of last night. Start when you went upstairs. Did you go right to bed—both of you?"

"Yes."

"And go to sleep?"

"Carlotta did," Pring replied. "She always does. I lay awake for a while."

"How long?"

"Perhaps half an hour."

"Go to sleep then?"

"Yes."

"What waked you up?" Pring hesitated.

"I suppose I did not really go to sleep at all," he replied. "I know that after a while I became conscious of the rattling of the bedroom door. You know how that is. You lie still and try to pretend you're asleep and that you hear nothing; yet all the time you grow more and more miserable."

"I always sleep pretty good," Coxon replied, and the other smiled.

"You are most fortunate."

"You was awake quite a while before you got up?"

"Yes."

"Half awake, or wide awake?"

"Oh, wide awake, I suppose. Trying to get up courage to get out of bed and fix the door."

"Hear anything while you was lying there?"

"No."

"Not a thing? No voices, or people moving, or a shot? I guess you couldn't have heard the shot, with the door shut. Silencer don't make much noise."

"I heard nothing," Pring insisted, "except the rattling of the door as the wind began to stir a little."

"So you got up?"

"Yes."

"What'd you do then?"

"There were matches on the table by the lamp, and I took three or four and began to stick them into the crack of the door."

"Didn't you open it?"

"No, not at first."

"And then you started back to bed?"

Pring hesitated. "I think I was still busy at that when the rabbit screamed outside somewhere."

Coxon nodded. "That woke Mrs. Pring, didn't it?"

"Yes; yes, she spoke to me right after that."

"But you went on fixing the door?"

Pring seemed to consider. Then he said gravely, "You come to the point now, Coxon. While I still stood by the door I heard a movement in the hall outside. Heard someone come up the stairs and go into the room opposite ours. I have been reluctant to tell you this; nevertheless, you ought to know it."

"Mr. Rotch's room?" Coxon asked, unmoved.

"Yes."

"How'd they come—slow or fast?"

"Quickly, I should think. But quietly, too."

"Think it was Rotch? Or Mrs. Rotch?"

"I don't know."

"Man or woman?"

Pring said reluctantly, "I really thought at the time it was a woman."

"Mrs. Pring heard it too?"

"She must have."

"So you opened the door and looked out?"

"Yes."

"Why? No reason Mrs. Rotch shouldn't have gone downstairs, was there?"

"I felt something might be wrong. A curious, vague impression, hard to define."

"So you saw the light, and came down and found Wardle shot?"

"Yes."

"Lying on the couch?"

"Kneeling, his head on the couch, as though he had been standing and had fallen forward."

"I expect you moved him."

"I don't remember. Probably. I probably shook him, lifted him—something of the kind. A natural thing to do."

"Sure." Coxon agreed. He considered. "Hadn't taken time to dress, then, had you?"

"I put on my dressing gown and slippers."

"When was that?"

"Before I came downstairs."

"Wardle had on the same thing, didn't he?" Coxon remarked, half to himself. "He'd gone to bed and got up again. If he got up to talk to someone, it was probably a man. He wouldn't hardly have come out to talk to a woman dressed that way."

"He might very well have done so," Pring argued.

Coxon did not press the point. He relaxed in his chair and filled his pipe again. When the pipe was going, however, Coxon said thoughtfully, "I wish you'd tell me how long you've known this Wardle."

"Since we were in college together," Pring replied.

"Go on."

"College, and afterwards. He inherited a partnership in a big bond house from his father. We used to run around with the same girls. He married my sister Bess. But they didn't get along."

"What happened between them?" Coxon asked.

"I don't think Bess ever loved him," Pring replied reluctantly. "But Wardle—you saw for yourself—had a way of taking it for granted that you liked him, and presuming on that assumed liking. He was so sure Bess loved him that she began to agree; he was superficially good company, not so obnoxious then as he afterwards became. At any rate, she married him."

"I meant, why did they get divorced?" Coxon explained.

"The actual divorce was technical, more or less by arrangement," Pring admitted.

"Why? What was back of it?"

Pring said slowly, "Well, Bess found she didn't love him. She came to the point of constant unhappiness, and once or twice she flew out at him in a rage. I believe she actually struck him, perhaps more than once, with whatever came to hand." He hesitated. "You must appreciate the fact that my sympathies were with Bess. Wardle tells a different story of their relations, but I believe my sister. She and I have the same temper. They must have had stormy times."

"Wardle was your friend," Coxon commented. "Must have been hard for you."

Pring made an impatient gesture.

"I tell you, I always disliked the man," he insisted. "But you could not insult him; he thought you were joking. There have been times when I felt like lashing out at him."

"Just like your sister did?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"How'd you happen to fetch him up here?"

"He managed that," Pring said sardonically. "The poor devil, he asked for it."

"Invited himself?"

"Exactly."

Coxon weighed this in silence; at last got to his feet. "Well," he said, "I dunno as there's anything else I can ask you. Oh, you don't know anything about Wardle and the other men—the other folks here, do you?"

Pring made a careless gesture with both hands.

"You've seen," he replied. "I don't suppose any one of us disliked him more than another."

"Miss Taber liked him, I thought."

Pring said, "It ought not to be necessary to involve her."

Coxon shook his head. "She's already involved," he replied. "Everybody's involved. What I'm trying to do is to uninvolve some of you."

"It's certainly safe to leave her out."

"How about Mrs. Rotch?"

"Yes, her too."

"Thought you said you heard her come upstairs?"

"What of it?" Pring retorted testily.

"This of it," Coxon replied firmly: "If you did, then she

knew he'd been killed; she must have seen him before you went down."

Pring brushed the thought aside.

"I don't know what to think."

Coxon considered. "You didn't hear anything in Miss Taber's room?"

"No."

"Her door closed, was it, when you came out in the hall?"

"Of course." Coxon turned toward the door.

"I guess I'd like to talk to Mrs. Pring," he said thoughtfully. But Pring checked him.

"Wait a minute," he exclaimed. "I'd like to ask a question or two on my own account, Coxon. How far have you gone? Have you any ideas?"

"Some," Coxon replied cautiously.

"What are they? Where do they lead?"

Coxon faced the other steadily.

"I guess I'll keep them to myself for a while," he replied.

"You've got to remember, Mr. Pring, that I'm working pretty much alone."

Pring smiled wearily. "You think I did this?"

"I haven't begun to think yet," Coxon replied steadily.

"But I know this much: You say you put on your dressing gown before you came downstairs, but Mrs. Pring says you had it on when she woke. And you say she heard someone come upstairs, but she says she didn't. That much I know." Coxon concluded. "I don't have to start guessing yet."

And before Pring could speak, he had swung open the door into the living room.

Chapter Ten

CARLOTTA, when the long and miserable night had dragged itself away and morning came, found herself still torn and tortured by her hurrying thoughts. She felt too weak and weary for movement, felt it impossible to face the others and conceal her despair from them. But after eating and drinking the victuals Coxon brought to her, she found her composure returning; and at the same time there began to awake in her that deep and steadfast loyalty which had been for a little smothered and coerced to silence. Her husband came again to the room after breakfast, but she pretended to be asleep and they exchanged no words. After he was gone, however, she decided to get up and dress; and while she was involved in this process, she heard, with some bewilderment, the others come upstairs to their rooms. A few minutes later Grace Taber knocked at Carlotta's door and Carlotta admitted her.

Grace at once burst into a flood of tears, throwing herself into the other's arms; and in comforting the other, Carlotta found some measure of her own strength returning. When Grace was quieted, the two women had some talk together; and Grace told Carlotta what had passed, what now went forward. The knowledge that Coxon was questioning her husband completed the restoration of Carlotta's poise and self-control; that he might be in danger strengthened her, and after a while she sent Grace gently back to her own room, herself went downstairs.

Bruton was in the living room, in his rôle of sentinel; but the amiable cook had always been Carlotta's slave. He had now no misgivings; it did not occur to him to announce her coming to Coxon. They spoke together quietly for a moment, by the hearth, and the cook told her Coxon and Pring were in the library, whose closed door, hidden behind the deerskin hangings, effectually deadened the sound of their voices. After a while she crossed toward it and stood still, in two

minds whether to open it or to draw back again. Standing thus, she caught the raised tones of her husband, challenging and angry. Then the door was opened, the deerskin thrust aside, and Coxon faced her, her husband at his back.

The two men, thus discovering Carlotta, halted in surprise. Then Coxon stepped through the door to her side. Pring came upon his heels, more slowly, and when his eyes met Carlotta's he stared at her for a moment with a fierce and truculent expression; then with a gesture of anger turned aside and passed her and moved across the room. Her hand flew to her lips as though to press back a cry of pain; her eyes followed him fearfully.

Then Coxon touched her arm and said softly, "I want to talk to you a spell, ma'am. Come in and sit down."

"I must talk to Warren," she protested faintly, still watching her husband.

But Coxon said insistently, "He's got some things to attend to. Come in and sit down."

She followed him, half distracted, and sat where he suggested. Coxon left her to herself for a moment while he replenished the fire and knocked out his pipe and stuffed it into his pocket.

Without looking at her, he said, "I thought you'd like to know how things have gone. I can see you're feeling better. You'll be all right after lunch."

He directed no questions to her, talked on in a gentle and soothing tone, detailing as much as he thought wise of the events of the morning, the manner and demeanor of the other persons in the house.

So he came at last to relate the part he had himself undertaken, the duty of collecting and collating all available information on the spot.

She found herself interested; asked at last, "Are you taking notes?"

"I remember things pretty well," he replied.

He explained that he had been talking with her husband. "About Wardle, and how long he's known him, and his sister and everything," he continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "Naturally, I started in with him and you because I know neither of you had anything to do with it." He was careful not to look toward her, careful not to see her reaction to this statement. "From what he was telling me, I guess Wardle

deserved what he got. He wasn't much of a man, now was he?"

"I never liked him," she confessed.

"I can see Miss Taber's fond of him," Coxon remarked. "It's funny; no matter how miserable a man is, there's always some woman finds something in him."

"That's so true."

He smiled. "I'm the only one," he told her. "Never was a woman cared enough for me to marry me, anyway." Her own eyes softened in something like a smile; he saw this and pursued his inquiry. "I thought you might be willing to tell me something about him," he suggested. "Things Mr. Pring wouldn't be apt to know."

She said uncertainly, "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, were him and Miss Taber thinking of getting married?" he asked.

She shook her head, her eyes wistful.

"Grace would have married him, I think," she confessed. "I thought last summer they would come to it. He was with her so constantly. And I'm sure Grace thought so, because she was radiantly happy. It was she who persuaded me to let him come up here. I believe she counted on finding an opportunity to be much with him."

"She has been with him quite a lot."

"But I don't believe he cared for her," Carlotta confessed. "Oh, he was attentive last summer—very much so. Quite without meaning it, perhaps, he put Grace in an unpleasant position, so that I think everyone assumed they were engaged."

"And they weren't?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Grace told me so."

"I shouldn't think she'd like him so very much after that." She smiled pitifully.

"That is the way with women," she replied.

He was silent for a little while; then he asked, "You know any reason why Doctor Moal should have a particular grudge against him?"

"I don't think so—except that they disliked each other."

"Wardle guyed him quite a lot. And I heard someone say that Doctor Moal lost some money in the stock market or something, on something Wardle told him." She nodded.

"I heard them joking about that," she agreed.

He watched her keenly.

"I kind of thought Doctor Moal liked Miss Taber pretty well, too," he suggested.

Carlotta seemed uncertain and reluctant.

"Did you?"

"I'm pretty sure of it."

"I should be ever so pleased if they did—become fond of each other," she told him. "He's a splendid fellow and she's a dear girl." He nodded.

"I like him," he agreed. "He's a good man. But didn't you ever think that—about him and her?"

"I must have thought it," she assented at last. "But Grace never spoke to me about him."

"He ever talk to you about her?"

"Yes; yes, now and then he spoke of her—always admiringly."

Coxon seemed to catalogue and file this information in his thoughts. When he spoke again it was to a new figure.

"How about Mr. Rotch?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

He said awkwardly, "The thing is, Mrs. Pring, someone did this. I'm trying to figure out who might have done it. Seems as though everybody had it in for Mr. Wardle, but that doesn't show anything. You can hate a man without wanting to kill him. I'm looking for something bigger."

"I understand," she agreed. "But there was nothing of that kind about Bert—about Mr. Rotch. At least, I knew nothing."

"Him and Doctor Moal both lost some money in that stock business."

"Yes, I think they did."

"Of course, that was just business; but Wardle must have geyed them about it. And Mr. Rotch did a good deal of drinking after he came up here. You can't always figure what a man will do when he's that way."

She said unhappily, "This is a terrible thing, Coxon. These people are my guests. I can't bear to discuss them so cold-bloodedly."

"I don't like it myself. But it's got to be done now or later, and better now."

"I suppose so."

He hesitated, then continued: "I see a good many things,

being around all the time the way I am. When I talk about them now, it's not curiosity; it's business. Didn't you think Mr. Wardle was playing up to Mrs. Rotch?"

"No, no!"

"It looked so to me."

She stared at him, and suddenly laughed a little. "You mean because he kissed her when they were dancing the night before last. That didn't mean anything. Bill was just the sort of man who kisses more or less promiscuously."

"I didn't happen to see that," he confessed. "But that wasn't what I mean, anyway. No, it seemed to me Wardle was making up to her just to see Rotch get mad."

"I haven't seen anything of that kind."

He abandoned the question.

"But suppose he was," he suggested, "and suppose Mr. Rotch found it out. Think Rotch might get mad enough to—shoot him?"

She said slowly, "I can't bear to think such things, Coxon. It's impossible for me to convince myself the thing has happened at all."

"I suppose any man, specially when he's been drinking pretty heavily, might get jealous and mad enough to kill," Coxon remarked thoughtfully.

"I suppose so," she wearily agreed.

"What I'm thinking is this," he explained: "Wardle came out of his room into the living room for something. Suppose that was to meet Mrs. Rotch; and suppose Mr. Rotch heard her come downstairs, and came down himself, after them. If they were sitting in front of the fire together he could get down without their seeing him; get into the gun room, maybe just to listen. And then he might have heard something to make him mad."

She said shudderingly, "Please, don't! I can't bear it!"

He checked himself. "Ma'am, I'm sorry," he said regretfully. "I was thinking aloud."

He looked at her, hesitated, then said firmly, "But Mrs. Pring, you've probably got some idea. Who do you think did it?"

She cried, "No, no, I don't think anything about it!"

He said gently, "We're bound to kind of suspicion everybody." He seemed on the point of saying something further, but checked himself.

After a moment he reached into his pocket and drew out

a handkerchief. "You can tell me whose this is, I expect?" he suggested.

She took it from him. "Why, yes," she agreed. "It's one of mine. I had it last evening."

"Didn't take it upstairs with you, did you?"

"I don't remember. Where did you find it?"

He hesitated. "Well, ma'am, I'll tell you," he replied. "I found it stuffed in behind that mounted trout on the wall, part way up the stairs."

"How in the world did it get there?"

"I don't know."

She was spreading it in her hands, scrutinizing it. "What is this spot on it?" she asked.

He took it from her as though to see more clearly, glanced at it, then folded it with some care and quietly restored it to his pocket.

"That's a spot of blood," he replied.

Chapter Eleven

THAT faint stain upon her handkerchief brought home the fact of the tragedy to Carlotta more forcefully than anything that had occurred theretofore. There is a sinister significance in blood. Even that of animals has a certain power to revolt and terrify. All persons feel in more or less degree this terrifying power; Carlotta was peculiarly susceptible. She had imagination enough to see not merely a dark spot upon white linen, but a visual evidence that as this blood flowed, life also had ebbed away. She saw not merely a small brown spot; she saw Bill Wardle, slain where he stood, his body sprawling all along the couch. And his blood had stained her handkerchief!

So now she stared at Coxon, lips groping for words, throat dry and aching.

When she could speak she asked, "But how did it get there? What does it mean?"

Before he could reply, however, her nerves rebelled and she flung to her feet. She retreated before him when he also rose, until she felt the door at her back, and so fumbled for the handle and burst into the other room.

Her sudden entrance there discovered her husband standing on the hearth, talking to Bruton; and at first, impetuously, she would have fled into Pring's arms, but his bearing somehow forbade. Coxon had come after her; she was abruptly afraid of the little old man, and she turned to the right toward the stair and ran away from them, up toward her room. Half-way up the stair she encountered Hubert Rotch, beginning to descend, and she swung past him with no word, and so to refuge behind her own closed door.

Rotch looked after her with a sardonic grimace, then continued on his way downstairs, the sound of his steps announcing his coming and those below waiting for him in silence. When he encountered their eyes, he seemed to feel

some hostility in their glances; and he stiffened himself for the encounter.

"A gloomy lot you look," he remarked cynically.

Coxon said gravely, "I was just going up to ask you to come down."

"Grace couldn't stand being alone," Rotch explained. "So she came in to weep on Julie's shoulder. That was too much for me. Besides, I wanted a drink."

The woodsman considered this; and Pring said thoughtfully, "I suppose it is infinitely harder for them than for us. Hard enough for us, God knows."

Rotch lifted a glass and filled it and said, "If it weren't for this, I should be decidedly at a loss. But as long as a man has a drink, he's not quite without a friend. Did that ever occur to you?"

Coxon asked, "Have you wrote out what you can remember of what's happened, Mr. Rotch—the way Mr. Pring said?"

Rotch, the glass at his lips, shook his head.

"Hardly. What's the use? What little I know, there's no particular danger of my forgetting."

"I was hoping you'd let me see it," Coxon explained.

"Nothing to see," Rotch assured him airily.

"Well then," said Coxon, "I wish you'd come into the library with me for a little while. I'd like to ask you some questions. I've already talked with Mr. Pring and Mrs. Pring."

Rotch glared at him with lowering brows, his manner changing.

"What particular business is it of yours, my friend?" he demanded.

Pring interjected, "I've a good deal of faith in Coxon. He's level-headed; he may be able to fit the bits of the puzzle together."

"I have no bits," Rotch replied.

"You can't be sure of that," Coxon told him. "Things that might seem to you not to matter might help a lot."

"The idea annoys me," Rotch retorted sardonically. "I do not care to be interrogated."

There was for a moment silence; then Bruton said roughly, "If that's the way you aim to act, you've got to expect us to think you know things you don't want to tell."

Rotch stared at him.

"Suspect and be damned!" he exclaimed. "What do I care for your suspicions!"

But Coxon, with a nod, bade the cook be silent; himself replied.

"That isn't the point," he explained.

"I'm not interested in your points," Rotch retorted. "I know nothing about this business, and I don't propose to be cross-examined."

"But I'm figuring on cross-examining you," Coxon replied, with a firmness which surprised the other. "I'd like to talk to you alone, but that's for you to decide."

"It's decided," Rotch replied grimly. "You lose."

Coxon made a gesture of resignation.

"If you won't come into the other room," he said, "then I'll have to ask you here where the others can hear. You lost some money on stocks, taking Mr. Wardle's advice, didn't you?"

Rotch grinned. "Motive stuff, eh?"

"I know he made you mad, too," Coxon continued.

"Righto! I had no use for the fat ass."

"You'd done more than your share of drinking," Coxon reminded him calmly. "I guess it's safe to say you've been half drunk all the time."

Rotch grinned; but his cheeks were flushed and his eyes were suffused with blood. He held himself in check, made no reply.

"I've seen your sort," Coxon remarked. "When you've drunk about so much, you've got a sneering sort of grin all the time; but you're ready to get fighting mad—killing mad—at mighty small excuse."

The other looked toward Pring with a grimace.

"This is what comes of having a murderer among your friends," he remarked.

"I didn't want to mention Mrs. Rotch," Coxon continued steadily. "But you thought Wardle was paying her too much attention. You were mad about that."

Rotch said between stiff lips, "I've a mind to mash your face in for that, old man, old as you are."

Coxon disregarded this remark.

"Mr. Wardle got up last night, after others were asleep," he persisted, his tone an accusation. "He came out here into the living room to do something, to meet someone. If you

had waked up and found Mrs. Rotch gone, and come down and found her talking with Wardle—what would you have done, Mr. Rotch?”

The question was cut off sharply; it ended on a lashing note like the snap of a whip. And Coxon's eyes fixed those of the man he questioned, and Pring and Bruton watched, scarcely breathing. Rotch himself became livid. He took a stumbling forward step, toward the other. Coxon did not move, but Bruton came a little nearer, ready to take a hand if the occasion arose. His movement caught Rotch's eye, distracted his attention, and the man looked away from Coxon toward the others, his glance baleful. But while they watched, he visibly brought himself to a measure of composure.

His color somewhat faded, he took a cigarette from his case and with steady fingers lighted it, expelled a cloud of smoke toward Coxon and said easily, “Sounds as though you were accusing me of this murder.”

Coxon shook his head. “You might have done it,” he replied. “But that's true of the others. Mrs. Pring didn't. She's the only one I'm sure of yet. You're not being picked out specially. I wanted you to answer some questions, and I've been trying to show you why you ought to.”

Rotch flicked away the ash. “You've failed to persuade me,” he said in an amused tone. “However, I'll go so far as to point out to your acute intelligence the fact that I was asleep. You would perhaps call it a drunken slumber. I was so thoroughly asleep that not even this yammering rabbit which awoke the rest of you penetrated my fuddled consciousness.” His color suddenly heightened, his voice rose, “Asleep, do you hear? Make what you can of that!”

“You say you were asleep,” Coxon agreed. “But how do we know it's so? Mr. Rotch, a minute or two after Mr. Wardle was killed, someone ran upstairs and went into your room. What do you say to that?”

Rotch did not seem surprised. “I assure you, you astonish me,” he replied.

“It wasn't you?”

“I was in the pleasant land of dreams, my friend.”

“Then who was it?”

Rotch said easily, “I suggest you ask my wife.”

Coxon studied him for a moment without moving; then

his posture relaxed and he nodded, turning away as though to dismiss the other.

"I'm going to," he replied, and started toward the stair. Rotch chuckled mirthlessly behind him. Pring and Bruton stood and watched him go.

Chapter Twelve

COXON went upstairs and knocked at Julie's door. After a moment's delay she bade him enter; and when he did so he discovered her in a chair by the hot little stove which warmed the room. Grace Taber, sitting on the edge of Julie's bed in a posture which suggested she had been lying across it on her face, had risen at Coxon's knock. The two women looked at the old woodsman expectantly. He stepped into the room and allowed the door to close behind him.

"I wanted to talk to you a little while, Mrs. Rotch."

Julie at first seemed puzzled; then smiled with understanding. "I remember. We're all to be questioned in due form. That's it, isn't it?"

"I've been talking to Mr. and Mrs. Pring and to Mr. Rotch," Coxon assented.

Julie looked at Grace. "Why don't you go in and see Carlotta?" she suggested.

Grace rose uncertainly to her feet, her hands a little outstretched as though she groped for a hold. Julie took her arm and led her toward the door, past Coxon. The two there whispered together for a moment; and Coxon, now that the light was behind him and upon Julie, saw that she was not so composed as she had seemed. It was only the contrast between her bearing and that of Grace Taber which had made her appear assured and calm; as Grace turned away and Julie faced him, closing the door behind her, he marked that her lips were white and her eyes somewhat dilated. There were cigarettes on the table beside her bed, and she lighted one with something like a swagger, and sat down in the same chair and crossed her knees as though to impress Coxon with her perfect lack of nervousness. He saw that her eyes flickered watchfully; that something like a film masked them. Her defenses were up.

With an instinct to put her at ease, he said casually, "You haven't been up in this part of the country before, have you, Mrs. Rotch?"

She seemed to welcome this opening.

"No, never," she agreed. "Of course, I've been outdoors, hunting and fishing; but never here."

"I thought when you shot that deer you were a cool hand—used to it."

She smiled with pleasure. "Did you? I was really frightfully scared. I shot a wildcat once; but birds have usually been my game. That was my very first deer."

"I've seen men go all to pieces at their first chance," he remarked, and chuckled. "I had a sport last fall," he continued reminiscently. "Mr. Pring wasn't coming up, so I was able to do a little guiding. I took this man in a canoe, up a brook above here, upriver; and I brought him around a bend right on top of a big buck. The buck was standing in the brook, and at first he didn't see us. He was feeding, head down, broadside on. This sport fired till his gun was empty, fast as he could pull, and never did bring the butt to his shoulder. I expect some of those bullets are still going. They were aimed high enough."

"I've heard of such things," she agreed. "My brother missed his first deer, with a shotgun and buckshot, at twenty yards. Yet he can drop a jacksnipe four times out of five."

Coxon saw the color returning to her lips.

"Where have you hunted mostly?" he asked.

"South Carolina," she replied. "A club Mr. Rotch belongs to."

"Quail?"

"Yes, and turkey and ducks and geese."

"I've heard there's lots of game down there."

"Lot's of it. Of course, they preserve it pretty carefully and keep the land stocked."

"The way we do our trout brooks," he agreed. "It has to be done, with so many people hunting and fishing. You live in New York, don't you?"

"Yes."

"I've always thought I'd like to go there once."

"You've never been?" she inquired in faint surprise.

He shook his head. "I was born on a farm about fifty miles south of here," he explained. "Took to the river when I was fourteen. But I haven't traveled to amount to anything, except in canoes, or coming back from Fort Kent after a trip through with a party."

"You're not married, are you?"

He shook his head. "No, ma'am. I never could seem to manage to find anyone willing to go into it with me."

She laughed in a friendly way.

"I expect you didn't try very hard."

"Well," he said gravely, "I've seen some mighty nice people, coming up here the way you people do. But they weren't my kind; and yet I suppose I couldn't help wanting that kind."

Julie was astonished to find her heart full of pleasure, while her eyes filled with tears. She thought what he had said the highest compliment she had ever received; her quick imagination seemed to scent the sweet dusts of an old and faded romance; she guessed a thousand guesses, and wished to question him, but his quiet gravity forbade.

"I've always been used to being in the background, watching people like you," he continued. "In a good many ways, you're different from the folks around here. You talk more without meaning anything but talk; and you joke with one another about things we don't mention unless we mean something. Like Mr. Wardle's kissing you. I could see that was just a way he had with everybody."

She did not perceive that her examination had begun.

"Bill was the kissing sort," she agreed carelessly. "He didn't mean anything."

"I didn't like him," Coxon confessed. "But I never thought there was much harm in him."

"Not a bit," she agreed. "I think Bill always thought he was the life of the party. I think he felt that everybody was as pleased with him as he was with himself."

"This is a kind of a joke on him, in a way. I expect he'd feel bad if he knew."

She was so amused at the whimsicality of this suggestion that she laughed aloud, and in the silence which hung over the big camp her laughter had a startling quality.

"I expect it would spoil his whole day," she agreed.

"I think he'd feel worse knowing someone felt like killing him than he would about being killed," Coxon pursued, in a matter-of-fact tone that robbed the topic of its terror.

"He was really lovable, in the way a puppy is lovable," she suggested.

"You've always known him, I expect?"

"Years and years," she agreed. "He and Bert saw a lot of each other."

"Good friends, I could see."

She made a gesture as though to say "I suppose so." Then added aloud, "Of course, Mr. Rotch isn't a particularly friendly sort. People are a little afraid of him."

"You've got to understand a man like that."

"I understand Bert through and through." Her tone had an edge which he detected.

"He was the only one in the house that slept through last night, I guess," Coxon remarked. "You woke up, didn't you, when that rabbit yelled?"

Her hesitation was barely perceptible.

"Yes; yes, that woke me."

"Didn't wake him, though?"

"No, he was snoring terribly," she replied.

"You hadn't been awake in time to hear anything downstairs, had you? I mean you went right to sleep when you went to bed—didn't hear anyone moving around?"

"I was in that first sleep that's so delicious," she told him. "When a person's waked up out of that sleep, I think they always stay awake a while, don't you?"

"I can sleep most any time," he replied. "But it don't take much to wake me. You laid awake afterwards, did you?"

She considered, as though trying to remember.

"I suppose I was half awake," she agreed. "Nothing made any particular impression on me."

"You didn't hear Mr. Pring go downstairs then?"

"No—well, I'm not sure. I have a faint recollection of hearing something. But if I did, I'd have thought it was just someone the rabbit had waked up. I didn't pay any attention."

"What time was it when you first went to sleep?" he asked. "I mean when you first came to bed."

"Why, right away," she replied.

"How long after you came upstairs then?"

"I didn't spend much time on my hair. It was cold. Twenty minutes; perhaps half an hour."

"I know sometimes you or Mr. Rotch read for a while after you go to bed. I've seen light in your room."

He thought her color faded. "I do sometimes," she agreed. "But I didn't last night."

His next question was delivered while she was still vaguely alarmed by his previous inquiry.

He asked quietly, "Who was it came upstairs and came

into your room, about a minute after the rabbit let out that scream?"

The effect of this question upon Julie was appalling. She had, upon his first coming, been alarmed and nervous; but his casual manner and his commonplace conversation had quieted her fears. She had gained confidence; had answered his more pointed inquiries when they came in a forthright fashion which gave her more confidence in herself.

And then, when all seemed to go well, the suggestion that she had read for a while last night had wakened her to faint alarm; and while she was still tremulous, his direct and damning question overthrew her hardly gained composure. So, though she sat still and motionless, Julie was all in turmoil and consternation, groping hopelessly for words.

"Into my room?" she asked with stiff lips.

"Yes," he said. "Of course, you might have been asleep before they got here. But I thought they—he—she—whoever it was might have waked you again."

She had no strength to seize the loophole he offered. "Into this room?" she repeated blankly.

"Someone came in here," he assured her.

"I must have been asleep," she said gropingly.

"You didn't stay awake but a minute then?"

"I do sleep soundly."

"I heard you telling Mrs. Pring you couldn't sleep up here, it was too quiet," he reminded her. "That's why you liked to read at night, I expect."

"That was so at first, when we first came," she confessed. "The silence used to oppress me."

"You sleep better now?"

"Oh, much better."

"Why, then," he suggested, "if you were so sound asleep you didn't hear anyone come in, maybe Mr. Rotch wasn't in bed here after all. You couldn't have waked up enough to be sure, if you went to sleep so quick after."

"Oh, I'm sure," she insisted, too bewildered to choose any device which might avoid the destruction she foresaw.

He looked away from her for a moment, then swiftly back again. "Now, Mrs. Rotch," he said in a friendly way, "I want you to be straight with me."

She protested, "What do you mean?"

He said flatly, "This morning, when I made your fire, there was a book on the table by your bed. You took it

downstairs with you and didn't let anybody see it and put it back in the library. What'd you do that for?"

"I don't know what you mean!" she cried.

"Doctor Moal says you brought it upstairs with you last night when you came," he continued, as though she had not spoken. "Did you?"

"Why, yes—yes, I did," she answered, seizing this explanation. "I'd forgotten. So many things have happened. But that was it."

"Read a little while after you got to bed?"

"A little while, yes."

"How long?"

"Not very long."

"Why did you take it downstairs this morning without letting anybody see it? What was wrong with your having it?"

"Anyone could have seen it," she protested. "I didn't hide it."

"I was watching for it," he told her steadily. "I had a notion right then."

"A notion?"

He leaned forward, fixing her eye. "Mrs. Rotch," he said impressively, "Wardle got up from bed and put on a dressing gown and came out into the living room for something, or else he came out to see somebody. I think he came out to see you."

"Me?"

"Yes, ma'am. I think you went to bed, and then you decided to read, and so you went down to get that book—and he heard you and came out and found you."

"He didn't! He didn't!" she cried.

"Why not?" he asked sharply. "Why didn't he? Where did you hide?"

"I was in the library," she told him; "in the library." His posture suddenly relaxed, and she perceived the extent of her admission. For a moment she stared at him, her eyes miserable. But at last she said unsteadily, "Well, yes, I was in the library."

He said in a kindly tone, "Mrs. Rotch, I want to say just one thing. Nobody thinks you killed Mr. Wardle, and I know you didn't. But you can tell me some things, and I want you to do it. Now you go ahead and tell me just what

happened, best way you can. You can help me if you want, and that's what I'm asking you to do."

She nodded slowly. "I know, I know. I was wrong; but I was afraid. You might have not believed me. I thought there was no need of anyone's ever knowing I was there."

He said urgently, "You tell me what you know. You went down to get this book to read, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Take a lamp?"

"No, I took my flashlight."

He nodded. "I found it on the library sofa this morning," he confessed, and drew it from his pocket. "You can have it back."

She stared at him in increasing terror.

"You see so much!" she stammered.

"Was the gun-room door shut?"

"I didn't notice."

"Library door?"

"The curtains were drawn, but the door was open."

"And you went in?"

"Yes."

"And then you heard someone come downstairs?"

She shook her head, faintly inclined to triumph over him. "No, I heard Bill come out of his room. The click of his latch startled me and I snapped off my light. Then he struck a match." She colored faintly. "I hadn't bothered with a dressing gown," she explained. "I expected to run down and right back upstairs again. So I didn't want him to see me."

"Couldn't he see into the library?"

"The hangings were drawn across the door, all but a crack on one side."

"He must have lit the lamp."

"Yes, he did." She hesitated, and after a moment he prompted her.

"Well, what did he do then?"

She seemed to weigh her answer. "Why, he walked around the room a little," she replied, "and he put a log on the fire. Then he sat down and began to read a book."

He said thoughtfully, "There wasn't any book on the library table. Just some magazines."

"It may have been a magazine."

"All right, go ahead."

"Well, he just sat there and read," she pursued; "and I

waited, wondering what to do. And at first I thought I would try to slip across to the stairs. His back was turned. But he might have heard me."

Coxon interrupted her with a decisive word.

"Now, Mrs. Rotch, I've got to say it again—I want you should tell me just what happened. I've seen the way you people are with one another. You don't mind little things. From what you say, you had on a nightgown, or pajamas or something, and you didn't want him to see you. But you know and I know that if that had been all, 'stead of sitting there in that cold room waiting Lord knows how long, you'd have called out and told him to keep his eyes on the fire, and skipped up to bed. If you figure on my believing you, you'll have to do different."

She surrendered so adroitly as to seem to put him in the wrong. "You wouldn't wait to hear," she protested. "I was going to tell you. I would have done as you say in a minute. But someone else came in."

"Came in?"

"Yes."

"If they came *in*, it must have been Doctor Moal. The rest were upstairs. They'd have had to come *down*."

"I didn't mean it that way," she told him quickly; hesitated, then went on in a firmer tone: "I don't want to tell you who it was, Mr. Coxon."

"Why not?"

"It's not fair."

He said soberly, "Mrs. Rotch, this is a murder. It's foolishness to talk of being fair or not. You've got to tell me who this was." She was still reluctant, and he added thoughtfully, "Matter of fact, you don't need to tell me."

"Why? Do you know?"

"I know it wa'n't Mrs. Pring, and I know it ain't likely any of the men would have got up to go down and talk to Mr. Wardle. I kind of thought from the first he was out there to see Miss Taber."

She threw out her hands at the name, cried, "You mustn't think hard things of Grace, Mr. Coxon."

"I'm not thinking hard things about anybody, ma'am," he replied. "I'm trying to find out what happened. Miss Taber came down and met him there, did she?"

Her eyes fell. "Yes," she replied, and her cheeks flushed. "What did they do?"

"They—talked together for a while."

"Then what?"

"Then she went back upstairs."

"Left him alone?"

"Yes."

He said gently, "I don't expect you want to tell me what they talked about?" She shook her head. "I'll have to ask Miss Taber that," he remarked, half to himself. "Hate doing that too. Going to make it mighty hard for her."

"She needn't tell you unless she wants to."

"She don't know you were there?"

"I couldn't bear to have her know, ever. She'd hate me."

He smiled faintly, and his tone was kindly.

"You tell me more than you think," he assured her. "Can't you see I'm going to guess somewhere near the truth? You know how things were between them, and I do too. I'm going to tell you what they talked about. She likes him, or did like him. And he—he's tired of her. And they talked about that, and he laughed. At last she got mad and ran away. I guess that was pretty close to it."

She hid her astonishment, managed an unmoved countenance.

"I don't mean to say," she repeated.

"Well," he assented, "I'll have to ask her then." He considered. "Go ahead," he suggested. "She left him. What'd he do then? Still sit there?"

"He was standing up," she explained.

"You watched—all the time?"

"No, no; I tried not to, tried not to hear. But when she—well, I knew when she went upstairs, and I looked out."

"You heard her go upstairs?"

"I saw her go toward the stairs," she answered slowly, a thought taking form in her eyes. "Yes, yes, I know when she went upstairs."

This last came more emphatically.

"And him standing there, looking after her—and laughing."

"I saw her go, but then I drew back, afraid he would see me—back in the shadows."

"Couldn't see him?"

"No."

Her eyes were clouded with thought, and he saw that she was trembling.

He said easily, "About then, you must have heard the shot."

"Yes," she answered slowly, her voice uncertain.

"Didn't sound very loud, did it?"

"I shouldn't have known what it was if we hadn't been firing the rifle that afternoon. Just a sort of 'chuh!' But I heard a sound from him, like a sigh, and then the springs of the couch creaked, and at the same time I smelled the powder."

"I should have thought you'd have yelled," he suggested, his tone grave and sympathetic.

"I did, I think," she replied. "I made some sound at least. Then I found myself going out into the room—till I could see him lying there."

"Lying there?"

"As though he were kneeling, his head and shoulders on the couch."

He considered this, asked in a new tone, "Did you notice anything about him?"

"I seemed to know he was dead," she replied.

Her courage was returning, and though her eyes were fixed and still, her voice was stronger.

"How were his arms?"

"I didn't notice. Oh, yes, I did. His right arm was out along the couch, flung out there."

Coxon was silent for a moment, then he leaned a little toward her with that movement habitual to the man when he wished to emphasize a question.

"Did you notice a handkerchief?" he asked.

She considered for a moment, then nodded.

"Yes; yes, I did," she replied. "There was one on the couch, partly under his head. I remember seeing it sticking out."

"Man's or woman's?"

"A woman's. I thought Grace might have left hers."

"Did you pick it up?"

A shudder ran through her whole body; she put her hands to her face, palms out.

"I couldn't have touched him!" she cried.

"What did you do?"

She answered, "I ran away." And when he was for a moment silent, she exclaimed, "Oh, I know it was cowardly! But my being there at all would have meant so many expla-

nations. I was so frightened. I just ran madly upstairs to my room. I didn't realize I still had that book till I got upstairs."

"Move as quiet as you could?"

"I suppose so."

He said slowly, "There's just this one last question, Mrs. Rotch: When you came up the stairs you came right in front of Miss Taber's bedroom door—right facing it. There was beginning to be some starlight outside by then. There'd have been light in her room, on that side of the house. If that door was open, you noticed it. If it was closed, you might not notice; but if it was open, you'd know it. I want to know."

Her eyes met his fearfully; her face twisted with grief. "I can't bear—"

"I wish you'd tell me the things you know and let me do the figuring," he urged almost roughly. "You're thinking if the door was open it shows Miss Taber was still downstairs. Well, if it does, we've got to find it out. But what you think it would mean if it was open don't matter." He hesitated. "I can see," he continued, "that you're beginning to think maybe she shot him. I think you're wrong; I know you're wrong to make up your mind now without knowing more. But whatever you think—" He checked himself again, half smiled. "There, what's the use of my asking? If it was shut you'd have said so. It was open then."

She nodded miserably.

"Yes, Grace's door was open," she replied.

Chapter Thirteen

UPON Julie's admission that Grace Taber's bedroom door was open a moment after Wardle was killed, Coxon rose as though satisfied with what he had learned.

He said mildly, "Well, that's something to go on. I'm much obliged to you, Mrs. Rotch."

Faint relief appeared in her eyes, whether because her ordeal was over or because she had been able to keep from him details he might have wished to know, he could not be sure. The old woodsman hesitated for a moment, struck with sudden doubt of the truth of her statements. She had at first concealed the facts; had amended her statement only when forced to do so. It was quite possible there was still something hidden, something she had not told; but after a moment's consideration he decided that if this were the case, he must accept temporary defeat. So he pretended to be satisfied, put a stick of wood in the stove and again expressed his thanks.

"This has got to be straightened out, you know," he reminded her. "I guess all of you want that. And I expect you've helped a lot by what you told me."

She rose to face him; said reluctantly, "I hated doing it."

He smiled with understanding.

"You're thinking of Miss Taber. I don't think you need to worry about her, ma'am."

"I'm sure Grace didn't do it," she said.

"Why, so'm I," he agreed. He opened the door. "I expect lunch is about ready by now," he suggested.

"I'm coming right down," she replied, and he closed the door behind him.

Having done so, he stood for a moment in the posture of one listening; but if he expected some betraying sound from within the room he was disappointed. So he moved toward the stair and down.

In the living room Coxon found Rotch and Pring and Doctor Moal now together. At his step they all looked toward him, and after a momentary silence Rotch said unpleasantly, "You were long enough."

"There's no cause to hurry too much," Coxon replied.

"Julie tell you anything startling?"

Coxon smiled.

"A while ago," he reminded the other, "when I asked you a question, you told me to ask her. I guess I'll say the same to you, now, Mr. Rotch."

Doctor Moal smiled faintly. Pring's countenance, rigid and weary, did not relax. Rotch colored with sudden anger, but did not speak as Coxon crossed between them to the kitchen door and went out to ask Bruton whether he needed help in preparing lunch. He thus put aside for a time his rôle of inquisitor and became something like a butler, arranging dishes and cutlery on the table, going back and forth between kitchen and living room. On one of these passages he saw Pring emerge from the gun room and join the two other men before the fire. The circumstances faintly impressed him, and he weighed it in his mind. At his suggestion, Pring summoned the three women from above stairs, and so presently they all sat down to lunch together. Since their number had been odd before, the removal of Wardle's chair now left no empty space which might have served as a reminder of the tragedy. Nevertheless, they must all have been conscious of what lay behind the closed door, so near the end of the table; and the conversation was restrained and awkward. Pring and Grace Taber scarcely spoke at all. Rotch exchanged a word or two with Julie, then silently addressed himself to his food. Doctor Moal and Julie and Carlotta talked together in tones unconsciously lowered.

When they were served, Coxon drew aside, a vague conjecture taking shape in his mind; and when an opportunity offered, he went inconspicuously into the gun room and opened a drawer in one of the cases there. It was the drawer in which he had left that pistol whose broken firing pin precluded its use. He was not surprised to discover that the weapon was gone, nor had he any doubt that Pring had taken it. The circumstance in itself meant nothing, he assured himself. It was natural enough for Pring, no matter how innocent, to wish to be armed. The fact that he had taken possession of the only weapon left in the camp might

have a sinister significance, or it might not. When he came back into the living room and found Pring's eye upon him, his guess that his employer had taken the pistol was confirmed by the other's expression, and he filed the circumstance in his memory.

Doctor Moal and Carlotta and Julie, willing to distract their minds, had fallen into talk together upon a topic apparently as far as possible removed from that which filled all their thoughts. They were discussing opera and the failure of opera in English. Coxon heard a sentence or two, heard Doctor Moal say:

"After all, opera deals with passions which in ordinary social intercourse are controlled and stifled. When you handle such matters without gloves, in the familiar speech of every day, they become so incongruous as to be incredible."

Carlotta nodded her assent.

"People don't go to opera for the story," she suggested.

"Operatic dramas," Doctor Moal continued, "are drawn from that period, about the time of Cellini, when men drove straightforwardly toward their desires—killing, strangling, lying, overriding every obstacle if they might have their way. The period of the pre-Shakespeareans. Any more recent setting must strain credulity."

Julie said thoughtfully, "Such things do happen nowadays, though. People are killed—"

She checked herself, as though only just remembering; her eyes unconsciously turned toward that closed door.

There was a moment's awkward silence, and then Carlotta intervened, said in a clear voice, "Warren, are you going to try to get into the woods this afternoon?"

"I hardly think so," he replied.

Rotch laughed.

"Little excitement in killing a deer after killing a man," he commented. Carlotta looked at him with cheeks suddenly ashen; looked from him to her husband.

Pring said mildly, "I hardly think Bert means that as a direct accusation, Lotta. You need not be alarmed."

"I hate to think about it," Carlotta said tremulously.

"No doubt it's more or less instinctive for us to want to keep together for the present," Doctor Moal suggested. "That is to say, those of us who—are innocent. The other will imitate the innocent, I suppose."

Rotch looked toward him with flickering eyes, but he made no comment. He had been drinking even more heavily than usual all morning; was more nearly on the verge of intoxication. His face was flushed, his eyes shot with blood, his lips pale. When he spoke, his voice was sufficiently steady; but there was a suspicious care about his movements when he was on his feet.

When they rose from the table, while the others drew toward the fire, Doctor Moal spoke to Coxon and handed him a folded paper.

"I thought Pring's suggestion a good one," he explained. "So I have written out my observation of the wound itself, and also a few details, more or less important. You may care to put it away safely against the time of need."

Coxon thrust the paper into his pocket.

"Much obliged," he said. "I wish they'd all do that, but the women won't want to. I'd like to talk to you for a while by and by, doctor."

Doctor Moal nodded, smiling faintly in assent.

"I am always at your service, in any way," he said courteously.

"I'm going to help Bruton with the dishes first," Coxon explained, and the other accepted this delay. Coxon returned to the kitchen.

When the dishes were done, Coxon went with Bruton to the cabin which the guides had occupied. Beside the stove there he set a chair, and from an inner pocket drew a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles which he adjusted to his nose. Then for a space he pored over what Doctor Moal had written. He found the account complete and careful. It began with the rendezvous of the party in New York, described their journey northward to the time of their meeting with Coxon, detailed the trip in to the pond and the days following. Coxon found that the physician had set down with some care the more conspicuous incidents illustrative of Wardle's offensive peculiarities. It was through this document that Coxon learned for the first time of Pring's open outbreak, his furious anger when Wardle spoke of his former wife. Doctor Moal had not spared himself in this recital; he detailed that bridge game when Wardle had derided him, and he related his own defeat in the matter of the target shooting. The whole account seemed to the guide dispassionate and just. He sought in vain for any evidence that

Doctor Moal suspected the murderer; sought equally in vain for any slip of the pen which might have pointed suspicion toward the doctor himself. When his reading was done, he bestowed the document in his pack sack and returned to the main camp. Pring and Rotch and Doctor Moal were in the living room, again alone, and Coxon guessed that the three women must be together above stairs.

Doctor Moal caught his eye as he came in from the kitchen, and at once rose and asked, "Ready for me, Coxon?"

"I thought we might stir up the fire in your room," Coxon suggested.

The doctor nodded.

"We'll need more wood," he said. "I used quite a bit this morning."

Coxon accordingly went to the pile by the kitchen door and took half a dozen pieces of split birch in his arms. Thus burdened, he followed the physician upstairs, and with a sheet of bark and a bit of spruce for kindling, set the fire going in the little stove.

Doctor Moal, closing the door behind them, now offered the old guide a cigar; but Coxon declined this.

"I've always stuck to a pipe," he explained. "If the smell of it don't bother you— She's pretty heavy."

Doctor Moal smiled.

"I can stand it," he assured the other. He drew a chair near the stove, and Coxon took another, whittling a fill from his plug and rolling it between his palms.

"I been reading what you wrote," he explained.

"Yes?"

"I'm glad to know some of the things you tell about," the other continued. "Of course, some of them I already knew. I hear a good deal and see a good deal, being around pretty steady. But there was one or two things."

"It's a curious situation," Doctor Moal remarked reflectively. "As far as my analysis has gone, I think it is accurate to say that we all of us disliked Wardle pretty thoroughly. Yet it's hard to believe any of us had sufficient reason to want to kill the man."

"You can't ever tell what will make a man want to kill another one," Coxon commented. "I remember, twenty years ago or better, there was a couple of men trapping up north of here, living in a little cabin. One of them liked to do the cooking—would have it that he should cook all the

time. He was a good cook, too; but he couldn't make good coffee, so the other man finally killed him. Man by the name of Broad did it."

The doctor smiled.

"Isolation, too close intimacy—these conditions often work curious psychological changes in men and women."

"That's the situation here," Coxon reminded him. "You've all been shut in together." His pipe was filled; he lighted it, settled a little in his chair and said thoughtfully, "I wish you'd go over last night, doctor. What do you know about it? I'd like to talk it over. We might think of something you've forgotten."

The other nodded.

"I'm trying to avoid imagining I remember things which didn't occur," he remarked.

"I guess you prob'ly heard that rabbit yell, same as the rest of us did," Coxon suggested.

"That was what waked me," the physician replied.

"Did you get right up?"

"No; no, I lay there for a while. It was cold, you know. I had my head pretty well covered."

"Could you see around the room?"

"I could if I raised my head," the other assented. "But for a time I did not move; did not look around."

"When did you look around?"

"When I heard someone moving in the next room."

"Mr. Pring?"

Doctor Moal nodded.

"Yes, I raised my head to listen, and saw at once that Wardle was not in bed. His bed was between me and the door, you remember. The blankets were thrown back and the bed was empty."

"I guess you thought it was him in the other room."

"Yes; yes, I did think that."

"You got out of bed, did you?"

"Not till I heard Mr. Pring speak. I think he must have called to his wife. I heard him say Wardle was shot. Naturally, that brought me out of bed."

"Did you go right in the other room?"

"My heavy bath robe was across the foot of the bed. I put that on, and my slippers. It was cold, and the wind was coming up. I noticed a little snow drifting in through the windows that open on the porch, so I closed them. Then I

opened the door and saw Mr. Pring, and a moment later Mrs. Pring came downstairs."

"Didn't take you very long, did it?"

Doctor Moal said thoughtfully, "It's hard to be sure of time. I don't think it took me very long."

"Mrs. Pring went right back to bed, didn't she?"

"Yes."

Coxon eased his posture.

"What did you and Mr. Pring think?" he inquired.

The physician half closed his eyes, as though seeking to remember.

"I know I assured myself Wardle was dead," he explained. "Then we began to conjecture how he had been killed. He had obviously been standing with his back to the fire, facing the stairs, and fallen forward on the couch. That meant the shot came probably from the gun room. The fact that we had not heard it suggested the light rifle. I remember we examined the rifle."

"Was the door of the gun room open or shut?" Coxon asked.

Doctor Moal considered for a moment.

"Open," he said. "I am sure of that." He went on, reciting such incidents as he remembered; and Coxon listened in silence, his attention evidently wandering. At length he interrupted.

"Doctor Moal," he said. "I'm going to come out in the open with you. I don't know who did this, any more than you do. Except that I know Mrs. Pring didn't do it and I know you didn't."

The other flushed with faint satisfaction.

"It's kind of you to say that."

"You couldn't have got to the gun through the living room without being seen," Coxon explained. "And you couldn't have gone along the porch, because there was snow there."

"I might have slipped across the room while Wardle's back was turned," Doctor Moal suggested quizzically. "Or Wardle and I might even have been talking together there."

"That's what I'm coming to," Coxon explained. "I know you didn't do that, cross the room, because Mrs. Rotch was in the library all the time."

The other received this information in momentary silence.

"In the library?" he repeated at last.

Coxon nodded.

"She tells me that much," he replied. "She had come down for a book and was in there when Wardle came out into the living room. She stayed there till after he was killed; heard what there was to hear and saw as much as she could see from where she was."

Doctor Moal studied the other thoughtfully.

"Then that suggests at once," he said, "that she can answer the first big question."

"Who killed him?"

"Not that, perhaps. But she can tell why he was there." Coxon nodded.

"Yes, she told me that."

The other waited for a moment, then asked quietly, "Do you—propose to pass on the information to me?"

"He was there talking to Miss Taber," Coxon replied readily, and looked toward the other with a steady glance. The physician received this information without a sign, save that his eye fell and he seemed to become absorbed in his own thoughts.

Coxon watched him for a long moment; then he continued slowly, "I guess they had a kind of quarrel. I thought it was funny their voices didn't wake you up."

Doctor Moal did not at first respond to this suggestion; but after a moment he lifted his eyes and met those of the other man.

"As a matter of fact, Coxon," he said quietly, "I knew this much."

Coxon considered this.

"You didn't want to mix Miss Taber up in it?"

"No."

"Well," said the old guide, "I guess I'm as anxious as you to keep her out of it. I'd like to have you tell me, though, anything you feel like telling."

"There's very little to tell," Doctor Moal replied, smiling a little awkwardly. "Simply that I was awakened by the commotion Wardle made when he got out of bed. I saw him go into the other room. And presently I heard—Miss Taber's voice with his."

"Not enough to justify me in repeating it. Mrs. Rotch did not tell you that?"

"I guess Mrs. Rotch knows a few things she didn't tell

me," Coxon admitted. "I kind of half think, matter of fact, she knows who shot him."

Doctor Moal considered this.

"Why do you think so?"

"Some things she said."

The other colored.

"You can't mean—Miss Taber?"

"Well," Coxon replied, "her door was open when Mrs. Rotch went upstairs."

"What of it?"

"That might mean she was still downstairs, still in the gun room, hiding there." He eyed the other. "I wish you could tell me whatever you heard them say, I've got to talk to Miss Taber pretty soon and I'd kind of like a lead—something to ask her."

"I can't go so far as that," Doctor Moal said thoughtfully. "I wish it were possible to spare her altogether."

"Can't hardly do that."

"Well, if she wishes to tell you anything, she will. You must not expect to enlist me against her."

Coxon nodded, rising.

"Well then, that's about all you know."

"Mighty little, I'm afraid," Doctor Moal replied courteously.

"You've helped some," Coxon assured him. His hand on the knob of the door, he paused. "By the the way," he enjoined, "I'd rather you wouldn't tell anyone I think Mrs. Rotch knows who did it."

"I can undertake to hold my tongue," the other gravely assured him.

"You see," Coxon explained, "if whoever did it knew that she knew, there's no reason why they shouldn't kill her too. I wouldn't have told anybody but you."

"I see your point," the doctor replied. "There really is that danger, isn't there?"

"We don't want too many killings around here," Coxon remarked, and with a nod opened the door.

Chapter Fourteen

WHEN Coxon emerged from Doctor Moal's room and closed the door behind him, he stood for a moment in the upper hall, his head bent, his eyes clouded with thought. From below stairs he heard a murmur of voices and guessed the others were all there together. He had now talked with all of them save Rotch and Grace Taber. Of Rotch he decided it was impossible to make anything. Guilty or innocent, the man had chosen to armor himself in defiance, to cloak himself in silence. If he were guilty, this silence was his privilege, with which Coxon was not minded to meddle. He wondered for a moment now whether Rotch's attitude were not the equivalent of a confession; shook his head. He could not presume so far. He must assume that Rotch, his temper on edge, had reached that sullen stage of intoxication where he refused every request and denied every suggestion with the unreasoning obstinacy of a drunken man.

There remained Grace Taber. Coxon looked forward to his conversation with her with a distinct distaste. He told himself now, quite frankly, that it was possible she had killed Wardle. She had loved the man and he had scorned her. This much even her friends knew; how much more sinister the actual truth might be, only she herself could now say. Wardle's lips were sealed. Coxon found himself imagining a scene between these two; a scene faintly tainted with theatricalism yet nevertheless sufficiently plausible; a scene at the end of which she might have flung away from the fat man with a last furious word; might have slipped into the gun room, willing Wardle should think she had gone upstairs, waiting to see what he would do. Perhaps the fat man had discovered she was in hiding there, had called some last derisive word to her, so that she was whipped into despairing fury and snatched the nearest weapon and fired. Coxon imagined her crouching in horror of what she had done while Julie emerged from the library and fled upstairs. Certainly Grace's door had been open when Julie went up; and if Grace had been already in her room, she must have

shut her door. Coxon was more and more convinced, not necessarily that Grace had killed Wardle, but that she had been in the gun room when Julie went upstairs.

He heard Doctor Moal moving about in the room at his back, and this sound brought him out of his abstraction, so that he crossed to the stair and descended to the living room. The others were all there together. Carlotta and Julie were sitting near the fire, their bodies wearily relaxed, talking idly with Rotch, or rather listening to the sardonic monologue of which that man delivered himself. Pring and Grace Taber were playing Russian bank at a card table at one side; and Grace was the first to perceive Coxon's coming, and her eyes met his, and she waited in silence for him to speak.

He hesitated, then said in a friendly and amiable tone, "Well, you folks have done about all you could do to help clear this thing up."

"Where have you left Doctor Moal?" Pring asked.

"I guess he'll be right down," Coxon replied. His glance passed from one of them to the other, fixed itself on Grace. "You're the only one I haven't talked to, Miss Taber," he suggested.

She made a movement as though to rise, then relaxed in her chair again, her color fading.

"I really don't know anything about it," she protested faintly. "I hardly even woke up last night. Of course, I heard that scream; but the bed was so warm and the room was so cold." She made a faintly whimsical gesture of deprecation.

"Well, I'll tell you," he replied. "I wanted to ask you just about one or two things that happened day before yesterday. They don't amount to a thing, but I'd like to know——"

"You're beset by curiosity," Rotch said sneeringly. "You're a busybody, my friend. Don't give him the satisfaction, Grace."

But Pring said evenly, "My advice is to go with him, Grace. Coxon, I'm sure, is doing what seems best to him."

Grace hesitated an instant longer; then slowly rose and crossed toward the stair. "Where shall we go?" she asked.

"It's warm in Doctor Moal's room," Coxon suggested, "and he'll be coming downstairs."

She nodded and went ahead of him. Upstairs, Coxon knocked at the doctor's door.

"The fires are out in the other stoves," he explained. "I thought we could come in here if you're going down."

Doctor Moal assented readily.

"I was just going down," he replied.

He glanced at Grace, hesitated as though he would have spoken to her; but there was nothing he could say. Only as he passed her just outside the door he put his hand towards hers and held it for an instant in a reassuring grip which seemed to give her strength. Coxon saw this interchange. Then she went into the room and he followed, closing the door behind them.

With the possible exception of Carlotta, Grace Taber had been all this day more obviously on the border of a nervous collapse than any of the others. Coxon saw that she was now as white as snow, and that she trembled, shudders passing over her body in great waves as she shook with terror. He waited for her to sit down, and for a moment he was silent, wondering how he should begin this conversation. So small a matter might precipitate her into a hysterical outbreak.

He sought for a way to avoid this; and at last, with the valor of desperation, said frankly, "Miss Taber, I can see you're mighty upset and scared, afraid of what I may have found out and what I know. I don't want to scare you worse. I'm going to tell you all I do know. Then you won't have anything to be afraid of. I want you to try to keep hold of yourself. You've got to figure I'm aiming to help you and I want you to help me."

She stared at him with pale lips quivering.

"I know you went downstairs to meet Mr. Wardle last night," he said steadily. "I know you were with him for a spell, and I know you came upstairs just before he was shot." He smiled. "That's all. Only, I want you, if you can, to tell me what you and him talked about."

He fell silent, uncertain what to expect. He would not have been surprised if she had screamed, wept, laughed; nothing she might have done would have surprised him. He had staked everything on his beginning; now waited to see what her reaction would be.

She had heard him through with widening eyes, the last vestige of color drained from her pale cheeks. She heard his statement that he knew she had been below stairs the night before with a faint muscular tremor like that of a person suddenly drenched with icy water. But save for that movement she did not stir, only sat very still and watched him; and when he was silent, her eyes slowly filled with tears,

and she closed them and relaxed in her chair, head back, while the tears flowed down her cheeks. But he saw her color beginning to return, and so knew she would not lose all control of herself; knew that his object was attained. This much of victory in his grasp, he sought to reassure her.

"Nobody else but me knows you were downstairs," he told her, and her eyes opened and she looked at him.

"Nobody knows?"

"Not a soul."

"How—did you find out?"

"I heard you say to him after dinner that you had to talk to him. I guess you planned to meet him downstairs after the rest were in bed."

She nodded in slow confirmation.

"Yes, yes; that is true," she confessed.

"Somebody shot him right after you came back upstairs," he continued. "I know you were upset, because you forgot to shut your door. Mr. Pring noticed it was open when he went down. So that made me sure it was you."

"I forgot it," she murmured.

"Forgot to shut the door? I expect you were upset."

"Yes, yes."

"When did you shut it?"

"After he went down. I was lying across the bed and I heard him go downstairs. I got up and started to undress, and then I saw the door was open and I shut it."

"When did you know about what happened?" he asked.

"I heard Carlotta come and call down to him," she explained. "I was leaning against the door, listening. I heard what he said."

He nodded sympathetically.

"You must have had a pretty miserable night."

Her face twisted with anguish at the memory.

"Oh, it was terrible, terrible!" she cried. "I was alone, and everything was so still. This horrible silence, all about us; knowing there wasn't a human being for miles. It wouldn't have been so bad if the night had not been so still. But I could hear my heart pound. Oh, I was half insane!"

"I expect you were."

She smiled quaveringly.

"I think if I could just have heard a street car——"

"I've known people couldn't sleep for the quiet, up in the woods here," he agreed. She was silent, and he added,

"Now, Miss Taber, I wish you could manage to tell me what you talked about." He saw her movement of fearful refusal and more hurriedly continued. "I want you should think of me the way you would of a doctor," he urged. "I'm something like a doctor—trying to cure what's happened. I can guess a good part of it." He studied her, saw her wide eyes full of gathering alarm. "I'll tell you," he suggested. "You just let me talk. I've seen you and Mr. Wardle together, and I'm an old man and I've watched other folks like you. I know you liked him. And I expect he must have liked you—must have made a fuss over you. But he'd quit doing that, hadn't he?"

She nodded miserably. "Yes."

"He was beginning to pay more attention to others than he did to you. You kind of wanted a chance to talk to him, alone."

"Yes." She watched him fearfully.

"And you tried to get him to tell you what you'd done, why he had changed."

"Yes, yes." Her cheeks were slowly turning crimson. "Oh, could others see as much as you saw?"

He smiled reassuringly.

"I don't expect so, miss. I don't think they could."

"I was miserable," she confessed, beginning to feel confidence and trust in the old woodsman. "Oh, I know it was my part to hide my feelings, keep still; but I wanted to make one last effort. He used to be fond of me."

"Of course he did."

"But last night I got angry with him," she confessed, "because he just grinned at everything I said; just sat and grinned. I got furious."

"He'd make fun of anybody," Coxon ventured cautiously.

"He did—he did," she agreed. "He made fun of me, in that way of his, as though he expected me to share the joke with him. He said he never meant to get married again; said he had had his lesson. Oh, he talked about Bess in a way I hated. I hardly know her, but she's a dear girl. I was as furious on her account as on my own." Her cheeks flushed. "I can't tell you!" she exclaimed. "I was shameless. It seems to me now I must have been blind. I can see now how obnoxious he really was. Oh, I was almost ready to kill him myself!"

Recollection filled her with anger as well as with shame;

and Coxon saw her more confident bearing and ventured to say whimsically, "I never saw a man that more folks felt like killing."

"If Warren had heard what he said about Bess he would have done something," she declared.

He considered this, shifted his posture.

"That reminds me," he suggested. "Somebody did do something, after all. I wanted to ask you. You didn't hear anyone come downstairs while you were talking to him, did you?"

Her cheeks were crimson.

"No."

"Think you would have heard them?"

"I might not have," she confessed. "We were sitting on the couch with our backs to the stairs. We talked quietly; but I was—I didn't know anything that went on, really. I might not have heard."

"Didn't hear anyone go down before you went down?"

"No."

"When you left him, you came right up?"

"Yes."

"And lay down on the bed?"

"Yes."

"I expect you were crying."

"I was crying with anger, I think, as much as anything. But I was miserable too."

"Did you hear anyone come upstairs while you were lying on the bed and crying?"

"No."

"Your door was open too?"

"Yes, it was open at first."

He considered thoughtfully.

"What was the first thing you did hear?" he asked.

"I heard Warren go downstairs," she replied. "That was the first thing."

"How long was that after you came up?"

She considered. "Not very long. Oh, I really don't know. I don't know how long it was."

"You had shut the door before Mrs. Pring came out into the hall, hadn't you?"

Grace hesitated.

"I listened, with a crack of the door open," she explained.

"I expected to hear what they would say."

Coxon asked with sudden attention, "Did you hear them say anything?"

"I heard Warren say something."

"What did he say?"

"Not the words; I couldn't hear."

"You didn't hear Mr. Wardle say anything, did you?"

She stared at him. "But that would mean Warren killed him—after he went downstairs!"

"I'm just trying to find out what you heard," he reassured her. "Did you hear Mr. Wardle?"

She shook her head.

"No; no, I'm pretty sure I didn't. I couldn't have. Why, Warren didn't kill him! You can't mean that!"

"I don't mean anything," Coxon assured her patiently. "What happened, then, was that you heard Mr. Pring go downstairs and say something and that's all you heard?"

"Every single thing."

"How long did you stay there?"

"I heard Carlotta's door open, so I closed mine, almost shut."

"What happened then?"

Her eyes drooped for an instant wearily.

"I heard her call to him and him answer."

"Heard him say Mr. Wardle was dead?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes; yes, I heard him say that."

"You hadn't undressed, up till then?"

"No."

"Did you stay there and listen for a spell?"

"I stayed there till Carlotta went downstairs and came back up again. Then I crept out into the hall to hear what Warren and Doctor Moal were saying; crouched at the head of the stairs."

"Why didn't you go down?" he asked.

"I thought they would wonder why I was still dressed."

"So after a while you went to bed?"

She nodded. "Yes, I went to bed."

He rose, stood for a thoughtful moment. "Did you notice," he asked at last, "whether the door of the gun room happened to be open when you first went down?"

She shook her head.

"How about when you came upstairs?"

She said slowly, "I don't think I noticed." Caught herself. "Yes, I did notice too. I remember the curtain was drawn

across it; but when I started upstairs I was almost running, and I put my hands out against the wall as I turned up the stairs. My right hand was on the wall, but my left hit the curtain, and I remember it gave way, so the door couldn't have been shut behind it."

His eyes were full of interest.

"That's the most important thing you've told me," he assured her; and repeated a moment later, "Yes, miss, I certainly am glad you told me that. And I want to thank you for talking to me at all. I know it's been hard."

"You've been—very considerate," she assured him.

"I don't want you should feel bad about my knowing," he urged, and she managed at last to smile.

"I won't feel badly," she promised him.

"It's going to work out all right."

"I'm sure it is."

He turned toward the door.

"You want to come downstairs?"

"I think I'll bathe my eyes first," she replied, smiling, and he let her go before him into the hall, and saw her enter her own room before he himself descended the stairs.

Chapter Fifteen

FOR a while that morning the sun had shone; but it was only for a little while. Then the sky became overcast again, and there was even a threat of further snow. When Coxon now came downstairs the short day was already drawing toward its close; the light out of doors was failing and the blue shadows upon the snow beneath the trees were becoming more and more somber. The wind no longer blew, and the hush of a winter evening lay upon the forest, surrounding and embracing the camp. This great silence seemed to filter through the walls upon the cold currents of air which penetrated the cracks beneath doors or about windows; the persons within doors felt its spell and submitted to it. Coxon found them all save Grace Taber gathered in a circle about the fireplace, talking together in low tones, with covert glances one at another. The light had already failed to such an extent as might have justified a lamp; but no one had made a move to light one. Upon the hearth a great fire leaped and crackled, cheerfully ignoring the mood which held the persons in the room. There was something like mockery in the gay demeanor of this fire.

Everyone looked toward Coxon when he came downstairs.

He met their questioning glances without comment, but said to Mrs. Pring, "I thought I'd ask Bruton to make some tea."

Carlotta welcomed the suggestion with a faint smile.

"I think we would all like that," she agreed; and Coxon accordingly went into the kitchen where the amiable cook was beginning the preparation of dinner. There was boiling water on the stove, and Bruton at once began to prepare the strong and stimulating tea of the north woods, while Coxon got cookies and bread and butter and a jar of jam.

Bruton looked at his chief with some curiosity, and at last asked outright, "What do you think now—eh, Bob?"

Coxon shook his head.

"I've found out a good many things," he replied. "It's kind of curious too. At first it looked like nobody knew any-

thing at all about it; looked as though they was all asleep. But come to find out, there were four that were awake, anyway—awake when Wardle was shot.”

The other’s curiosity quickened.

“Who were they?”

“I want to talk to you about it after a spell,” Coxon replied, his tone lowered so that those in the next room could not hear. “Wait till after dinner. I’ve got a scheme that might do some good. I’m figuring on trying it and you’ll have to help some.”

Bruton nodded his assent.

“You just let me know what you want,” he replied. When Coxon went into the other room again to serve the tea he found that Grace Taber had joined the others before the fire. Someone had brought the library couch to replace the one that had been removed; chairs were grouped at either end of it. Coxon arranged the tea things on the table and lighted the large lamp. The sudden illumination made them all blink a little; their eyes, widened to see more clearly in the darkness that had been gathering, narrowed and contracted now. Rotch, at one end of the couch, slumped so far down that he seemed to be lying on his shoulder blades, was asleep, and Julie at his side perceived this and gripped his arm and woke him. He pulled himself to a sitting position, grumbling, with swaying head, and Coxon saw that the man was far gone in drink. Julie showed her distress; the others paid him little heed.

They drank the hot strong tea eagerly, Pring and Doctor Moal adding a little rum to theirs. In the kitchen Bruton clattered cheerfully about his work. Coxon waited to attend their wants if any should arise; and after a considerable interval, during which no one spoke except Carlotta, to ask for directions as to sugar, cream, lemon or the like, Pring cleared his throat in the fashion of a man faintly ill at ease and addressed the old woodsman.

“Well, Coxon,” he said thoughtfully, “you have gone the rounds; you have talked with each one of us now.”

“Except Mr. Rotch,” Coxon amended, with a glance toward the man he named. Rotch leered at him and grinned.

“You’re not going to get at me,” he said ponderously. “I’d like to have you understand, my friend, that I’m a guest in this house and as such entitled to respect. If somebody chooses to kill somebody else, that’s none of my affair. I

don't care a damn. Doesn't concern me. Doesn't interest me." He waved a large hand. "It doesn't interest me in the most insignificant degree." His utterance, though his tones were thick, was careful and accurate.

Coxon made him no reply, and after a moment Pring said, "All of us but one, then. You have your way with all of us but one, Coxon. I wonder if you have anything to report."

"Well, sir," said Coxon mildly, "you each know what you told me. I don't plan to repeat what anyone told me. I can go this far, though: I can say that four of you were awake when Wardle was shot—four of you, anyway. That's something to start with." He hesitated, saw them scrutinizing one another with that sudden access of suspicion, that increased doubt and fear which his statement was calculated to awaken. "There's one thing, though, that I'd kind of like to bring up. Maybe some of you can help out, or think of something."

Pring waited for a moment, then said courteously, "I think you may fairly assume that we are interested, Coxon. What is this particular matter?"

"Well, sir," said Coxon, "it's this." He drew from his pocket that small handkerchief which he had shown Carlotta a few hours before. "Here's a thing that doesn't seem to have any meaning at all. It's a handkerchief. Mrs. Pring says it's hers, and that she left it downstairs last night.

"Now I found out in another way that Mr. Wardle had a handkerchief, or something white, in his hand when he was shot. He had it when he fell on the couch. There's a spot of blood on this handkerchief now. But he didn't have it in his hand when you found him, Mr. Pring. You and Doctor Moal are both sure of that." He turned and pointed to where the mounted trout hung on the wall above the stairs. "I found it stuffed in behind that fish," he explained. "You saw me find it there this morning, Mr. Pring."

Pring nodded, with faint hesitation.

"Yes," he agreed.

"How do you figure it got there?" Coxon asked. "How did it get out of a dead man's hand and hide itself 'way over there?"

His question held them for a space in silence. He put the handkerchief carefully away in his pocket, waiting for them to reply.

Rotch had gone to sleep again. Pring seemed to have nothing to suggest.

Carlotta said thoughtfully, "It's certainly my handkerchief."

"Do you suppose Wardle knew it was yours?" Doctor Moal asked her. "Assuming that he did have it in his hand."

"I don't know," she replied. "It isn't marked."

"The scent?" he suggested.

She shook her head.

"No."

"Then he didn't know it was yours?"

"Unless he had noticed it during the evening."

"I suppose we can safely assume that the man who killed Wardle also hid the handkerchief," Doctor Moal suggested thoughtfully.

His words seemed to rouse Rotch, who pulled himself erect and demanded harshly, "Man! What makes you think it was a man? Anybody could pull that trigger, couldn't they? Well then, why aren't we all in this boat together?"

For a moment no one replied; then Doctor Moal said in a placating tone, "Person, if you prefer."

"That's much better," Rotch agreed with great dignity. "That's a great improvement. Yes, sir, that's perfectly agreeable to me." He seemed to slumber once more.

Coxon asked surprisingly, "Mr. Pring, I wish you'd look at this handkerchief. Would you know it was Mrs. Pring's?"

He extended a bit of linen, and Pring approached him and glanced at it, and after a moment said, "Yes, I think I should recognize it." There was something unnatural in his tone, so that Coxon looked at him with attention. Carlotta rose and came to her husband's side and put her arm lightly through his; he turned to look down at her, his lips twisting, and abruptly he added, "I might as well explain this small mystery to you, Coxon. I put the handkerchief where you found it."

The silence became palpable and tremulous before Coxon spoke.

"Why?" he asked.

It was Carlotta who answered.

"To keep me from being dragged into this, Coxon. Warren would never say so, but that was the reason. Don't you see?"

Coxon saw slow color flood Pring's cheeks, so that the

man was like a boy ashamed of being discovered in a worthy deed.

"Was that it, Mr. Pring?" he asked.

"I hardly reasoned the matter out," Pring said slowly. "It was probably instinctive rather than deliberate."

But Carlotta held his arm more firmly.

"I understand," she insisted, her eyes upon him tenderly.

So the tension which held them all abruptly relaxed. The others accepted this explanation. Coxon, though he seemed to do so, was quite sure the handkerchief might have a deeper significance. He busied himself removing the tea things, and while he did so, Carlotta, in her capacity as hostess, thought it wise to suggest a rubber of bridge before dinner; and since Rotch was still asleep, the five others cut in. Pring found himself excluded by the chance of the cards. It was as a result of this circumstance that when Coxon presently returned to the living room Pring drew him aside. They went toward the door of the gun room and stood by the foot of the stairs, talking together in low tones.

Once Rotch opened his eyes and saw them and asked, "What are you talking about over there?"

But neither of them replied to him, and though he continued to watch them, he did not speak again.

Pring had asked Coxon whether he had discovered any further circumstance. Coxon nodded readily enough.

"I was waiting a chance to speak to you, sir," he explained. "There is one thing." He glanced toward Rotch, who was watching them, and turned his back in that direction. "I guess you feel the same way I do about who did this, Mr. Pring," he continued, and saw Pring's eyes turn toward Rotch and the others with a faint inner satisfaction. "I can't prove it, of course," Coxon continued. "But I've got something that will prove it."

Pring asked swiftly, "What is that?"

"I'm kind of taking it for granted that when you and Doctor Moal found the rifle, the empty cartridge had already been ejected," he suggested.

Pring considered, eyes thoughtful.

"Yes," he said at last; "yes, I remember that when we looked to see whether the gun had been fired, I ejected a cartridge and it fell on the floor. Doctor Moal picked it up, and after he had looked at the gun he put it back into the magazine. It was loaded."

"That's what I thought," Coxon agreed. "Well, then I've got the empty one that killed Mr. Wardle."

"Where did you get it?" Pring demanded.

"You remember I told you I had a new brand when you were all shooting targets yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Well, you used the last of the old. I threw the empties into that cigar box in the gun room. Well, this morning I looked in there and I found an empty—the new brand. I've got it."

Pring considered this.

"You're thinking of finger prints," he suggested.

Coxon nodded.

"Yes; yes, I am. I had wiped the rifle with oil, and whoever handled it got oil on his fingers. There's the mark of somebody's fingers on that cartridge, Mr. Pring. I picked it up on the end of a match so as not to rub them."

"Where is it?" Pring asked.

"Put away—in the cabin," Coxon told him; "hid as well as I could. I didn't even tell Bruton. That's the most important thing I've found out, sir."

"You had better tell me where it is," Pring suggested.

"Why?"

"Something might happen to you. Then it would be lost."

Coxon nodded.

"You mean—whenever shot Wardle might want to get rid of me? I'm figuring to look out for that, Mr. Pring."

The other hesitated, then made a little movement of reluctant assent.

"I hesitate to oppose your ideas," he confessed. "Have it your own way. But—take care of yourself, Coxon."

"That's why I took away all the guns," Coxon replied. Then Carlotta called from the bridge table.

"Your turn to cut in, Warren." Pring turned that way.

"All right," he assented. But Coxon for a moment restrained him.

"There's one thing," he said. "When you went to get the rifle, was the gun-room door open or shut?"

"Shut," Pring replied. "I remember distinctly."

Coxon nodded.

"I think I ought to tell you," he added, "that Mrs. Rotch was in the library all the time—came down to get a book."

She says she didn't see who shot him, but—I'm not sure that's so."

Carlotta again summoned her husband.

"Coming, Warren?" And with a glance at Coxon he obeyed. Doctor Moal rose to yield place to him. Rotch perceived this movement and made an effort to get to his feet.

"I say, I'll cut in too," he exclaimed.

But Julie said quickly, "No, Bert; no."

Doctor Moal added a good-natured word.

"Take a rest, old man," he suggested. "You're well off as you are." He nodded to Coxon as he passed the guide, and said casually. "I'm going to get a breath of air." At the same time he went through the gun room and opened the French windows, passing out to the veranda. Coxon, after a moment's hesitation, followed him. Doctor Moal was about to close the windows from the outside, fumbled for the handle which was not there, and then perceiving Coxon, said curiously, "How's this? The handle's gone."

Coxon nodded.

"I meant to put it back," he explained, ill at ease.

"Oh, you took it off?" Doctor Moal asked.

"Yes," the old woodsman confessed; "yes, I took it off this morning."

The doctor looked at him keenly.

"What was your idea?"

"Well, sir," Coxon said uncomfortably, "I took it off—well, I thought then you might have done this, Doctor Moal. If you did, you probably came along the veranda and into the gun room that way, and there might be finger prints on this handle. After I'd taken it off and put it in a safe place I remembered the snow on the porch floor. Then I knew you couldn't have done this business, of course, or you'd have left tracks. But—I've been pretty busy; didn't take time to put it back. I came out hoping I could keep you from noticing it was gone now."

The doctor smiled.

"Afraid of offending me?"

"Well, I was pretty sure you'd understand."

The other had lighted a cigarette, carelessly assented.

"Of course, Coxon. I advise you to try everything that occurs to you. The more I consider this matter, the more its very simplicity seems to baffle me." Coxon shook his head.

"I'm not so much worried about that," he confessed. "I've

got two or three things. It wouldn't be right for me to tell you about them, probably. I have an idea Mrs. Rotch knows more than she has told too. No, sir. I'm not afraid but what we'll find out who did this, all right. It's other things that are bothering me."

Doctor Moal showed his interest. "What, for example?"

"Well," Coxon confessed, "I'm afraid of more killings."

"More?"

"I guess you know my idea, sir," the guide told him. "If whoever did this could protect himself or herself by killing somebody else, why shouldn't he do it? I can't see. I figure that whoever it was is pretty well nerved up now—having to play a part all day, and looking forward to a night with nothing to do but think, and more days of waiting, with no chance to get away. Their nerves must be right on edge. I can imagine some pretty ugly things that might happen. Burn the camp maybe; kill everybody in it."

The other smiled.

"You don't look like an imaginative man," he protested.

"I guess there's more sense than imagination to that," Coxon urged. "I'd like to make you see it the way I do."

Doctor Moal shivered faintly.

"It's cold out here," he said. "Let's go back inside."

So Coxon followed him, shutting the tall windows behind them. As they entered the living room, he said in a low tone in the other's ear, "Mr. Rotch is in bad shape, it looks to me."

He saw the doctor's eyes turn toward Rotch, who had roused at their coming; and a moment later he was not surprised when Rotch got uncertainly to his feet and said loudly, "Say, listen. What's going on here, anyway? You, Coxon. First you take Pring over and tell him something about me, and then you and the doctor talk me over. Listen, I'm likely to make a row about this. What you trying to do, anyhow? It looks to me you're trying to pin something on me." There was a faint confusion in his thickening speech.

Coxon met the other's eyes squarely, but he offered no reply; instead, moved past him and went out into the kitchen, leaving Doctor Moal to placate the angry man as he could. The old guide was well content with the progress of events; there was, when he met Bruton's eye, a faint smile on his lips. But Bruton's first word awakened him to a new concern.

The amiable cook drew near him and said softly, "Bob, there's a knife gone."

"A knife?"

Bruton nodded vigorously.

"It was here this morning, because I used it to slice bacon with. The big butcher knife. I washed it up and stuck it in its slot there, and she's gone."

"When?" Coxon asked.

"Must have been while you and me were down at the cabin after lunch. I haven't used it since."

Coxon said gravely, "That's bad. I never thought of the kitchen knives. Ought to have taken them away." He looked at the other curiously. "Now who do you guess?"

"I don't know."

"Sharp, was it?"

"I rubbed her up the day before the folks came in." The other nodded.

"Dinner nearly ready?" he asked; and when Bruton assented, he set himself to help with the preparations, and presently served the dinner in the other room. Afterwards, alone with Bruton, he returned to the matter of the knife again. "It fits in," he explained. "It's what I've been expecting, in a way."

"Looking for it? Why?"

The two men were eating together at a small table by the kitchen window, a lamp between them. Their voices were low, scarce more than murmurs, inaudible in the other room.

Coxon poured coffee into his cup and said slowly, "I've found out a good deal today, talking to them all, one after another. Some of them told the truth right off, and some didn't; but I guess they all finally came to it, more or less. Anyway, I'm believing some of them. I guess Mrs. Pring was asleep, all right. Mrs. Rotch says she came down to get a book and was in the library when he was killed. She says she don't know who did it; but she thinks Miss Taber might have. I could see that. Mrs. Pring kind of thought at first that Mr. Pring did it; but either she's changed her mind or else she's sticking to him anyway. I don't guess Miss Taber did it. Seemed like she was telling the truth, when she got around to it. That leaves the three men."

Bruton nodded.

"It ain't the sort of thing a woman would do, anyhow."

"Well, you can't tell; but I guess you're right," Coxon

agreed. "But when it comes to the man, I don't know how to figure." He was silent for a moment, eating busily; at length continued: "I'll tell you what I'm planning on," he said. "I've kind of tried to let each one of them think I've got something on him; think I've got something that shows he did it, without me knowing what it shows, myself—except maybe Rotch. If the doctor did it, he must have gone along the porch. There wasn't any tracks in the snow; but the wind changed about that time, and maybe the snow didn't drift onto the porch till after. I've took the handle off the outside of the gun-room door, and he knows it. If he went in that way, he'll have to figure that maybe he left the print of his hand on it. And Pring—he came downstairs and went back up again, if he did it; and maybe he did. I've got the cartridge that was shot, and I told him so. If he did it he thinks the cartridge will prove it on him. Rotch I don't know about. He's drunk and mad enough to do anything." He looked toward the other. "I kind of expect whoever did it will be after my hide tonight."

Bruton uttered a low ejaculation.

"What you going to do?"

"Well," said Coxon, "I'll tell you. I'm going to stay in the living room all night, kind of keeping watch; in a chair with my back to the stairs. It's going to look easy to get at me. But I'll have a pistol handy, and I'd like mighty well if you'd take a rifle and come around by and by and get on the other porch, where you can look in and keep an eye on things. Don't go to shooting too quick. But if you see any reason, you jump in and take a hand. Will you do that?"

"You're right I'll do it!"

"It's going to be pretty cold," Coxon warned him. "But I don't guess you'll have to wait long. If anything's going to happen, it ought to be within a hour or so."

"I'll stick with it," Bruton promised.

The other nodded.

"You do that," he agreed. "I don't mind taking some chances; but I never was the bait in a trap before, and it makes me kind of nervous."

The cook nodded.

"I'll see to't the trap don't come shut on you," he promised.

They had finished, their pipes were going, and Coxon helped with the dishes. From the other room he could hear

now and then the murmur of voices. He went in at last to ask if anything were wanted, and Carlotta told him they were comfortable.

He said slowly, "I thought you'd want to know that I'm planning to spend the night here in the living room. I'm kind of worried for fear something else may happen, so I aim to keep an eye on things."

They considered him in silence; then Pring said, "I'll relieve you, share the watch with you."

Coxon shook his head.

"You didn't get any sleep last night, sir. You go to bed. It won't bother me any."

Grace Taber said with a movement of dismay, "I can't believe any of us will sleep tonight. The thought of being alone terrifies me."

Doctor Moal smiled.

"You'll find your nerves will relax, once you are abed," he told her, and glanced at the others. "Of course, I'll be glad to give anyone who wants it something to help them get to sleep."

"I shall be able to sleep," Pring replied, and Carlotta echoed, "I too."

Rotch was already slumbering, slumped in a sodden heap in his chair, apparently unconscious of what went on around him.

Grace said slowly to the doctor, "I think I will—ask you to give me something."

Doctor Moal looked toward Julie.

"How about you?"

She shook her head, faintly smiling.

"I shall take a book upstairs," she replied. "I don't mind lying awake if I must."

"If any of you need me in the night, just call out," Coxon told them, and they nodded, understanding. He asked, "About what time do you figure on going to bed tonight?"

Pring glanced at the others, then replied, "I expect it will be late."

"I thought I'd get some sleep beforehand," Coxon explained. "You can send Bruton to wake me when you get ready to go upstairs."

Pring nodded assent; and Coxon, after a momentary hesitation, went out through the kitchen again and departed toward the cabin. In his bunk, he closed his eyes and was

asleep almost immediately; he wore not at all the bearing of a man who was about to put his life in pawn.

Toward midnight Bruton wakened him. Coxon made sure the other understood the part he was to play, and then went up the path to the main camp. He found that, save for Doctor Moal and Pring, the others had already gone upstairs; the two men exchanged a word or two with him before departing.

When he was alone Coxon surveyed the big room thoughtfully. The farther wall, where the stairs were and the doors to gun room and library, was all in shadow. At one side was the closed door of the room where Wardle's body lay. The guide shifted the lamp so as somewhat to increase the illumination in the direction of the stairs; then he drew a great chair before the fire and with the lamp at his shoulder settled himself in comfort. There were magazines on the table and he chose one and opened it. When his movements ceased he could hear the footsteps of Pring as he prepared for bed in the room above. These slight sounds ceased at last, and upon the big camp a silence settled, a hush that was full of prickling currents. Coxon, his back resolutely turned toward the stair from which his peril must come, felt, for all his courage, the hair scratch and crawl upon the nape of his neck; and in the stillness he could hear the strong pounding of his heart.

The impulse to swing around and face the stair was almost uncontrollable. Sweat broke out upon his forehead as he fought to hold himself still. After what seemed to him an eternity he looked at his watch and found that he had been scarce five minutes in his chair; and this discovery reconciled him to the wait that lay before him. He relaxed a little, releasing by sheer force of will the tension upon nerves and muscles; and he slumped lower in his chair.

Once he grinned with faint and derisive amusement. This smile was provoked by the thought that though to any observer his behavior must have seemed brave to the point of audacity, he was in reality half paralyzed with stark and dreadful terror.

He was, in fact, so much afraid of what might happen to himself that it did not occur to him that Julie Rotch was actually in even greater peril.

Chapter Sixteen

THERE may be, under certain circumstances, a soothing and beneficent effect in silence; but complete quiet is much more likely to make the average person uneasy. A boy alone upon a lonely street at night will whistle, and sometimes a man under the same circumstances whistles as loudly as the boy. When two persons in company fall silent at the same time, unless they are very good friends indeed, each is uncomfortable until the conversation is resumed. Only the rare philosopher has the ability to go into a desert place and sit him down and permit the great hush of the wilderness to infold him. There is a quality in silence which provokes the fearful imagination. The ordinary man is glad to clear his throat, to scuffle his feet, to talk to himself in a low and reassuring tone, to sing or whistle or hum.

Old Bob Coxon was in no respect an ordinary man. The mere fact that he was by profession a guide and woodsman set him apart from other folk, for this business of being a guide is one which puts its mark upon a man. His life is at the same time that of a servant and that of a master. He does great labors, and at the same time he commands and he instructs. His contact is, ordinarily, with persons of some superiority who are nevertheless inferior to him in all the lore and the craft of the forest. The inevitable result of this contact is to breed in him confidence in himself and his own powers and faint—though usually tolerant—scorn for the men with whom he deals. Among this guild of guides, set apart from their fellows, Bob Coxon enjoyed a certain pre-eminence; he received the deference of his fellow craftsmen, and when they were members of a party which he directed they obeyed him readily and freely.

But the fact that Coxon was thus an extraordinary man among extraordinary men did not keep him from acting like an ordinary man in his present situation. He had that intellectual courage which upheld him in what he meant to do; he had decided to set a trap, himself as bait, and he did so. But though he was sure of the wisdom of his measures, he

was nevertheless as terrified by the ominous silence of the night as any other man would have been. A few minutes after the others had gone upstairs the last sound of their preparation for bed ceased. The deep hush of the surrounding forest seemed to permeate the big camp, seeping in through windows and doors until the wide living room was full of it. This quiet was so intense that Coxon could hear his heart; it seemed to him that by looking down at his breast he could perceive the vibration of his solid flesh, stirred by its pulsations.

By and by he cleared his throat in a loud and unnecessary fashion, and looked about with a certain defiance in his air as though to say, "You see, one can make a noise if one chooses." Then he busied himself with the magazine he had chosen and turned the pages rapidly, enjoying their rustling. The occasional crackling of the fire was reassuring; the whinny and flicker of its flames pleased him. In one of the logs, penned-up moisture was, by the increasing heat, distilled into steam which found an opening through the solid wood and shot out a hissing jet of smoke, and Coxon was near approving this manifestation by a nod. He scraped his chair nearer the fire; he adjusted the lamp; he rose and tapped out his pipe against the upper part of the fireplace; then casually strolled around the room, passing the windows which opened out on the porch, where he saw Bruton standing attentively on guard. He made the cook a little sign of reassurance, and by the other's presence was himself reassured, so that he came back and sat down in the chair, his back turned boldly to the stairs, to wait for what should come to pass. He had refilled his pipe, and now he lighted it and enjoyed the pleasant sound his inhalations evoked from it.

The influence of the strong tobacco, combined with the comforting knowledge that Bruton was watching over him, somewhat relaxed the tension of his nerves. He had in the pocket of his coat an automatic pistol, and he took this now and stuck it inside his belt, under his coat on the left-hand side, where his right hand rested upon the butt, ready to bring the weapon into instant play. His posture, though it was easy, was not completely relaxed; his feet were gathered under him, and save when now and then he fingered the bowl of his pipe, his left hand rested on the arm of his chair, ready to lift him quickly to his feet.

The fire was warm, the lamp beside him radiated a genial heat; and Coxon began to forget the immediately critical situation in which he was thus playing a passive part. His thoughts turned to speculation; he began to wander back through the day, dissecting the facts he had learned, speculating as to the truth or falsity of what each person had said to him. He had an orderly mind, a part of the orderly habit of his life, the habit of an old bachelor who is accustomed to care for his own belongings without the assistance of any woman's hand. Thus he presently brought himself to consider just how much he knew of Wardle's movements the night before. Without putting the thought into words, he attempted to reconstruct the crime.

Wardle, having said good night to the others, had gone to bed. That is to say, he had undressed and put on his night attire and pretended to compose himself for slumber. He must have kept himself awake by some slight effort; must perhaps have consulted his watch as he waited for the hour appointed by Grace Taber. Or perhaps there had been no definite hour involved in their plan; perhaps they had simply agreed that she would come downstairs after the others were all abed.

At any rate, Wardle undoubtedly lay awake, presumably waiting till he felt sure Doctor Moal, in the bed beyond his own, was asleep. Then he must have risen, drawn on his slippers and dressing gown, and as quietly as possible gone out into the living room. Yet he had made sufficient noise to arouse the doctor, who had watched him go without remark and without revealing the fact that he was awake.

In the living room Wardle lighted the lamp. Then he strolled about the room, put a log on the fire, glanced at a magazine, waited for Grace to come. No doubt he listened, heard her steps before she reached the foot of the stairs, perceived her approach. She must have come quietly. Coxon remembered that she had worn, the evening before, low, soft moccasins, so that her footsteps would have been almost noiseless. Perhaps Wardle did not hear her; but at any rate she came, and they met before the fire, and no doubt sat down up on the couch and fell into conversation together.

Coxon felt sure he could guess the burden of their conversation. He could imagine what Grace Taber had said, the manner of the saying, and the fashion in which Wardle had received what she had to say. A phrase leaped into his mind.

Grace had said that Wardle spoke of his former wife unpleasantly, that if Pring had heard him he would have done something. Those had been her words; they seemed to rivet Coxon's thoughts now to a single point, to the hypothesis that Pring had done this murder.

He considered the case against his employer. Pring had, perhaps in higher degree than any of the others, a reason for killing Wardle. He had his sister's wrong to avenge. Coxon remembered that these two were twins, and it occurred to him that there was sometimes a curious psychological kinship in such cases. Pring himself had said that his sister was occasionally the victim of furious bursts of anger against Wardle; had added that he and his sister were much alike. Coxon knew, from his own observation, that Pring had a capacity for sudden rage, not always controlled. Considering the matter now, he was satisfied that Pring might have wanted to kill Wardle.

But—could he have done it? Had he the opportunity? The old woodsman began to analyze what had happened. When Carlotta woke, Pring was at the door of their room, already clad in his dressing gown and slippers. If he had risen only to secure the door against rattling, would he have taken time to put on these garments? Perhaps. The room must have been cold. But certainly he had them on, and this being so, he might have been downstairs before Carlotta woke at all. Perhaps she even knew of his absence and concealed it. Coxon remembered that she had, at least in the beginning, suspected her husband.

The time element entered into his conjectures. Assuming that Carlotta spoke truth, Pring was at his door when Julie came upstairs, or when he said he heard her come up. Coxon assumed for the moment that this was true. Then when Carlotta awoke, Wardle was already dead; and Pring could not have killed him when, leaving Carlotta awake, a moment later he went downstairs. If he had fired the shot it must have been some minutes before. He must have shot Wardle and hurried up to his room before Julie emerged into the living room in the first shock and confusion of her discovery of the murder itself.

There was a further possibility. Pring might have fired the shot, then drawn back into the gun room till after Julie went upstairs; might have followed her up and entered his own room almost on her heels, before Carlotta was awak-

ened by the scream of the slain rabbit. He tried to remember whether Julie had fixed the time of the murder in relation to the rabbit's cry in the night. She had said at first that the scream woke her; but at that time she was not yet brought to the point of telling the truth about her movements, had not admitted her visit to the library. Coxon made a mental note to ask her about the rabbit in the morning. If the beast had screamed before she came upstairs, then Pring must have come up well before her, could not have done the murder.

But—could he have shot Wardle and then come upstairs before Julie emerged from the library? Had there been sufficient time for him to do this? Whoever shot Wardle ejected the empty shell and put it in the cigar box on the gun-room table. This was the sort of thing Pring might have done, or Doctor Moal, or anyone else familiar with weapons and with a certain sense of order. But if Pring—or whoever shot Wardle—had actuated the lock of the rifle while Julie was still in the library, then she must have heard the sound. Whoever shot Wardle, therefore, must have remained in the gun room till Julie had gone upstairs. If, then, the rabbit cried before she came upstairs, Pring had not shot Wardle. The woodsman considered this conclusion so evident that he was half moved to rise at once and waken Julie and put the question to her. If she had reached her room before she heard the rabbit, Pring might still be guilty; but if the other were the case, then he was surely innocent, and his elimination infinitely simplified the problem with which Coxon was laboring.

He attempted to attack the question from another angle, recalling his talk with Grace Taber. She had fled from Wardle's presence to her own room, left the door open, flung herself across the bed. Her door was still open when Julie came upstairs, for Julie had seen it so. It was still open when Pring went downstairs, according to Grace herself. Pring had not remarked this open door; his attention must have been fixed upon the light below stairs. But if Pring had come up before Julie, Grace might have heard him. Coxon remembered with sudden illumination that Grace had heard no one come up the stairs. If no one came up the stairs, then—Doctor Moal shot Wardle, since he alone slept on the lower floor. But Julie had certainly come upstairs, and if Grace failed to hear her, she might equally have failed to

hear one who took more pains to move without sound. The fact that she did not hear Julie made of small importance the fact that she had heard no one else.

He realized more and more clearly that the element of time was tremendously important. How long was it after Wardle was shot before Julie emerged from the library? How long was it after Grace came upstairs before Pring went down? How great was the interval between the time the rabbit cried and the instant of the murder, and which preceded the other? Coxon wished with faint and resentful impatience that either Grace or Julie had been able to answer these questions, had been able to estimate with some accuracy the passage of time. The thought made him wonder how long his vigil had now continued, and he looked at his watch and realized with a faint prickling of the scalp that it was within a few minutes of twenty-four hours since Wardle, standing almost on the spot where Coxon's chair now stood, had been struck down.

This discovery brought flooding back that shuddering fear which had at first tormented him, which the activity of his thoughts had for the time dispelled. He found it again impossible to sit still, and he rose under pretext of knocking out his pipe, and began to fill it again, standing by the hearth, his eyes wandering around the room. The door of the bedroom where Wardle's body lay fixed his attention; he had a momentary impression that it was open a crack, and took a step or two that way before he discovered that a line of shadow had deceived his eyes. The kitchen door was reassuringly shut. He crossed the room with an impulse to make sure that the doors of the library and gun room were closed. He found the door of the library open, and shut and latched it. The other, the gun-room door, was already latched. The deerskin hangings, stiff and unwieldy, almost wholly obscured these doors; nevertheless, the fact that he had now closed them gave him a certain sense of security. He wished uneasily that there were curtains upon the windows around the living room. One outside the camp might so easily hold him, inside, at their mercy. But on one side Bruton protected him; and after all, no one above stairs could get out-of-doors without descending through this room.

He returned at last to his chair and sat down again, vaguely reassured by his own movements. If this trap were

to seize its prey he must, he reminded himself, sit still and play the part of an easy victim. If he were right in his theory, then someone would presently come down the stair and seek to steal upon him from behind. They could not shoot from the stair itself; he remembered with gratification that the useful weapons were all in the cabin. There was only that pistol whose firing pin was broken, which Pring had taken from the gun room hours before. Coxon began to speculate once more, to wonder why Pring had taken that weapon. Pring himself had broken the firing pin at his last visit to the camp; he must have remembered this; must have looked to see whether it had been repaired or replaced. A man of Pring's habits would certainly make sure the weapon was in order. Therefore if he had it, as Coxon believed, he knew its uselessness. With it, however, a deadly blow might still be struck, and Coxon's scalp tingled at the thought, and he held himself rigidly still.

There was also the kitchen knife, the theft of which Bruton discovered. It was impossible to know who had taken that; but to use it the murderer must come clear across the room from the stair foot, and Coxon felt sure he would hear even the most careful approach. Or if he did not hear, then Bruton would see. The old guide tried to decide whether Rotch or Doctor Moal had taken this knife. He remembered, with startling suddenness, that Doctor Moal had brought with him a small surgical kit, which must contain something capable of use as a weapon. Coxon blamed himself for having failed to think of this before, for having failed to ask the doctor to surrender the kit. But if Doctor Moal were already thus armed, he would have been under no necessity of stealing the knife. Had Rotch, then, taken it?

The woodsman thus abandoned speculation as to Pring's guilt to consider the case of Hubert Rotch. Rotch was not a prepossessing man. He was of a type which Coxon instinctively disliked; and his demeanor all the day just gone had been defiant, morose, truculent. But the manner of each of the individuals in the camp had been, since the event, abnormal and disturbed. This was inevitable. Carlotta, suspecting her husband's guilt, played her part; Pring himself had been under a quite obvious restraint, guarding his utterances. Grace Taber's perturbation was well enough accounted for by her experience the night before, and this was true of Julie Rotch as well. Only Doctor Moal had been able to

maintain something like his natural ease of manner. Therefore the fact that Rotch had been sullen and morose established nothing; might well be the simple consequence of his steady drinking.

Nevertheless, it was perfectly possible that Rotch had killed Wardle. He might have been awakened by his wife's movements as she left their room; might have followed her downstairs to see what she was about; might have slipped into the gun room to avoid discovery when Wardle appeared; might have listened to what followed.

But Coxon suddenly realized that nothing Wardle could have said to Grace Taber would have justified Rotch in shooting him. This consideration brought the guide up short and his thoughts began to race. He had, in suspecting Rotch, gone on the theory that Rotch might have discovered Wardle with Julie. But if Julie spoke truth, and if Grace spoke truth, Wardle had not even known of Julie's presence below stairs. Rotch, his senses fuddled, might have mistaken Grace for Julie. This seemed incredible; nevertheless, Coxon clung to the possibility and tried to strengthen the hypothesis.

But he could find no circumstance to bolster up his case against Rotch, and after a while he began to believe that Rotch must be eliminated from consideration. This on the theory that Grace and Julie spoke truth. Their stories were corroborated, at least in part, by that of Doctor Moal; therefore Coxon was inclined to accept them. It was true the two young women had had opportunity to concert a tale; but if they had wished to do so they would hardly have devised so involved a narrative as that which they had related to him. Furthermore, he thought he had broken down Julie's defenses, and Miss Taber's too. He felt more and more certain that what they said was truth.

And if true, then Rotch could have had no reason for killing Wardle. Coxon weighed this conclusion, found himself more and more forced to accept it as certain. And his heart faintly quickened its beat, for if Rotch had not killed Wardle, then the slayer must be either Pring or Doctor Moal. So soon as he could ask Julie about the rabbit's cry he might be able to eliminate Pring. The old guide thought he began to see light through the dark disorder of events. He shifted his position and relighted his pipe, which he had forgotten to keep burning.

His mental activity now momentarily relaxing, he became

conscious once more of the intense silence which filled the big camp. Save for the faint purring of the flames of the hearth and the murmur of his pipe, there was not a sound. In other seasons the forest would have been full of the whisper of life, but now snow blanketed and muffled everything. Within the camp the very air seemed to sleep like a still pool, without motion. Yet in this silence there was to Coxon something ominous. Above his head six persons lay abed. Some of them were undoubtedly asleep; perhaps all of them save one. But one, Coxon felt sure, lay awake, waiting, nerving himself to that which must be done. It seemed to the guide that between that malignant, wakeful mind above his head and his own thoughts a certain communion was developing; he thought something like waves of hatred and destruction flowed from the other toward him; and he sat very still, receiving these impressions; weighing the impalpable silence with his senses finely attuned to catch the faintest sound, to detect the pressure of a foot upon the stairs or the faint breathing of anyone behind him in the room.

It was at that moment when his whole body was thus attuned and receptive that the silence was shattered; shattered and destroyed and broken into thousands of flying fragments by the jangle and clamor of the telephone bell upon the wall by the kitchen door.

The effect of this loud and resonant alarm in the stillness of the night was hideous. The ringing of the bell seemed to Coxon to endure interminably. It wrenched him to his feet, where he stood shuddering, drenched in its continuing waves of sound. He pressed his hands to his ears, tortured by the outcry of the bell.

Then it fell abruptly still, and a voice almost at his elbow ejaculated an oath, and Coxon whirled to see Hubert Rotch standing at the stair foot—Rotch, who, he had decided, must be innocent of Wardle's murder.

Yet Rotch, who had come downstairs so softly that even in the silence Coxon had not heard him, stood now at the foot of the stairs in his pajamas, a great water pitcher of heavy crockery like a weapon in his hand.

Chapter Seventeen

DISCOVERING Rotch so unexpectedly, and in the moment when the alarm of the telephone still left him quivering and startled, Coxon wrenched from his belt the pistol which he had there, and whipped it into position, leveled at the other man's middle. At the same time, automatically, and without any thought, he asked, "What do you want?"

Rotch, whose eyes were red and swollen, and whose nerves were already taut before the telephone set them jangling, answered hastily, "A drink of water." He lifted the pitcher which he held in his hand.

Coxon stood rigid, half crouching, half expecting an attack, staring at the other man for a long moment.

"What did you come down so quiet for?" he demanded.

"I just came down," Rotch replied.

"Trying to sneak up on me?"

The other exploded angrily.

"Put that gun down! You're going to make a fool of yourself before you're through, you old ape! Point that thing away from me. It makes me nervous."

The telephone shrilled again, long and impatiently; and Coxon's eyes, whipped toward it, uncertain what to do. He dared not take his eyes off Rotch, yet the phone was on the other side of the room from the stairs. His dilemma was solved, however, by the appearance first of Pring and then of Doctor Moal, the latter treading on the other's heels, coming swiftly down the stairs. They had been roused by the sound of the bell, had taken time to don dressing gowns before coming to discover what this reunion with the world over a slender thread of wire might mean.

Pring, discovering Rotch and Coxon thus face to face, the latter with his pistol still leveled, asked, "Was that the telephone, Coxon?"

"Yes," the guide replied.

"You have answered it?"

"No." Coxon looked toward Rotch. "When I got up I saw

Mr. Rotch right behind me with that pitcher. I hadn't heard him come down. It surprised me to see him."

Rotch interrupted.

"So he stuck a gun in my face. I want a drink of water; that's why I came down. Coxon was so busy playing detective today that he forgot to fill my pitcher, and I'm thirsty—woke up thirsty. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

For the third time the telephone bell broke in upon them; and Pring, without answering Rotch, now walked across the room to the instrument. Doctor Moal remained at the foot of the stairs behind Rotch, watching him and Coxon with a faint smile. Rotch, for all his defiance, seemed unwilling to move so long as the pistol covered his body; Coxon, on the other hand, seemed unwilling to lower the weapon. Thus standing, they all listened to Pring's end of the telephone conversation. They heard him say:

"Yes, this is Mr. Pring speaking. Bullard? Got through safely then? Ah, that was good work, and fortunate also. You've talked with him? He is coming at once, I assume. . . . In the morning. . . . No, we've found out nothing more here; nothing at all, I'm afraid. . . . Yes. Do you want to speak to him?"

He abandoned the instrument and turned to Coxon.

"He wants a word with you," he announced; and Coxon almost reluctantly relaxed his guard over Rotch to go to the instrument. His replies to what Bullard said were curt and monosyllabic, meaningless to the listeners.

When he had hung up the receiver, Pring said to the others, "Bullard tells me the sheriff happens to be almost in this neighborhood, at a lumber camp twelve to fifteen miles north of here on another matter. Bullard got him on the phone."

Doctor Moal asked thoughtfully, "Does that mean he will be here tomorrow?"

"Bullard says he undertook to start at once," Pring replied. "It seems there is not even a wood road, but he can follow a certain brook. I am not sufficiently familiar with the geography of the locality to understand the details; but he should be here, Bullard assured me, soon after daylight."

Rotch said angrily, "Good thing, too! Have someone here to take charge and shut off this old fool." His eyes swung resentfully toward Coxon.

Coxon approached him, said quietly, "I'll fill your water

pitcher, Mr. Rotch." And took it from him. As he went toward the kitchen Carlotta called from the head of the stairs; and they heard the two other women whispering with her.

"What was that, Warren?" she asked.

"The telephone, Lotta," he replied. "The sheriff will be here in the morning."

"Oh."

"You'd better get back in bed," he advised. "You'll catch cold."

There was further whispering above stairs, then Mrs. Pring replied, "I think I'll come down for a minute."

They saw her descending, and Grace and Julie followed her and the three gathered in a little group with Pring and Doctor Moal and Rotch, discussing this incident which had disrupted the silence of the night.

Coxon, returning from the kitchen with the filled pitcher and discovering them, was reminded that he had a new and vital question to ask Julie; he watched his opportunity and drew her aside.

She came, her eyes anxious; and he led her toward the hearth, away from the others, and said in a low tone, "I've been thinking, Mrs. Rotch. There's one thing I forgot to ask you, and it's kind of important." She nodded nervously.

"You asked me so many questions; it doesn't seem possible that you forgot any," she said with a faint smile.

"You heard the rabbit yell, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Where were you when you heard it?" he inquired. "You see, that kind of helps to fix the time when things happened. Were you downstairs, or in the library, or on the way up, or in your room?"

"Oh, in my room," she replied readily.

"Sure of that?"

"I certainly am. I was in bed, huddling in bed, scared and trembling; and when that terrible scream came it made me start and cry out. It frightened me dreadfully."

His eyes turned away from her to the others.

"Well, that's fine," he remarked. "Yes, I'm glad to know that."

Then Rotch came toward them and took his wife's arm.

"Come here, Julie," he commanded impatiently. "You and Carlotta and Grace go on upstairs. You haven't got enough on."

She glanced at Coxon, and he nodded as though to give his consent, and she turned away and linked her arm in Carlotta's. The three women went slowly upstairs together. Pring and Doctor Moal had seen Julie talking with Coxon, and he perceived their scrutiny; but as it had not previously occurred to the guide that she was in any danger, so it did not occur to him that he had put her in even greater peril now.

When the women were gone, Doctor Moal asked Coxon, "What sort of man is this sheriff, Coxon? Has he any particular wit?"

"He's a pretty shrewd man," Coxon replied. "Yes, sir, he's got good sense. I'll be glad to have him here."

"It will at least remove the responsibility of action from our shoulders," Doctor Moal commented. "That will be so much gain." Pring nodded.

"It's like calling in a doctor," he agreed. "You immediately feel that things are going to take a turn for the better."

"In the meanwhile," Doctor Moal remarked, "we might as well go back to bed. I'll confess I am sleepy."

"I too," Pring assented. "I'm beginning to feel the reaction, after the strain of the day just gone. You are quite all right, Coxon?"

"All right, Mr. Pring," Coxon assured him. "You go back to sleep and forget all about me."

They bade him good night and climbed the stairs, and the old guide watched them go without moving from his stand before the fire. He did not stir until his ears told him each had entered his bedroom and closed the door; then with a step or two he moved to one of the French windows that opened on the porch and found Bruton just outside.

Coxon said softly, "You used your head, all right. I'm glad you didn't come in, didn't let them know you were watching."

"I saw you had him," Bruton explained.

"Did you see him come downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Was he—sort of sneaking?"

Bruton shook his head.

"He didn't seem to be," he confessed. "He just came right down. I thought you'd heard him."

"I didn't," Coxon confessed. "I guess my ears are getting old. You'd better let me know if anybody else comes down."

"I guess that's right," Bruton agreed. "Then you can be ready."

"Just put a little piece of snow against the lower pane," Coxon suggested; "something white that I can see. I'll be watching."

"I'll do that," Bruton promised.

"And don't you miss anything," Coxon urged. "I guess I'm getting kind of nervous; but it's scary business, sitting there expecting a crack on the head."

"I'll see to't they don't get at you," Bruton assured him, and Coxon withdrew into the living room and closed the door. The fact that the sheriff would be here at daylight, he was quite sure, made the crisis more immediate. If the murderer wished to silence Coxon he must act at once. So the old man riveted his eyes on that lower pane of the window where Bruton's signal would appear; but while his eyes never left that spot, his thoughts resumed their activity.

Julie's answer to his question left him no better off. If she had heard the rabbit while she was still downstairs, then Pring must have been innocent, for Carlotta said he was in his room when the rabbit cried. But the rabbit's scream came after Julie was abed; therefore there would have been time for Pring, coming upstairs on her heels, to get into his own room before its cry awakened Mrs. Pring. He must have been, if this were the case, just inside the door; and he was, indeed, in that position when Carlotta first discovered him.

Rotch, in spite of the fact that he had crept downstairs so silently, Coxon again dismissed from consideration. The man had obviously been as thirsty as he pretended. When Pring brought the water from the kitchen he had poured and drunk glass after glass. He had reason to be thirsty, Coxon decided with a faint smile; but if he were innocent, as he appeared, then either Pring or Doctor Moal must have killed Wardle.

Coxon found it difficult to believe that Doctor Moal was the murderer. He cast back over the day just gone, weighing and considering. Doctor Moal had himself always well under control, Coxon remembered; he gave no evidences of that capacity for passion or rage which might have moved him to such a deed as this. His demeanor all day had been natural and without constraint. This might be, Coxon admitted to himself, because he had more need than the others to con-

trol himself; but, on the other hand, it might be an indication of an untroubled mind.

The guide remembered that Doctor Moal alone had adopted Pring's suggestion, setting down a written record of the incidents preceding and the events following the crime. Even Pring himself, though he had suggested this procedure, had failed to adopt it; nor had any of the others done so. This, like the doctor's manner, might be an evidence of guilt, or it might indicate his innocence and his scientific desire to diagnose the situation and find its remedy.

While Coxon's thoughts were thus engaged, the guide became conscious that something was amiss. He had been absorbed, his thoughts concentrated. He put these thoughts aside now and set his senses on the alert, listening, straining every nerve. He could hear nothing, but since Rotch had stolen down on him, the old man no longer trusted his ears. He was on the point of turning around to survey the room when he perceived, upon a lower pane of the tall French windows, a little patch of snow! Bruton's sign that someone had come downstairs.

His heart leaped, his pulse quickened, and he felt the blood throb and beat in the great vessels of his neck. But his posture did not change; he remained relaxed in his chair, only his right hand gripped the butt of the pistol, his left prepared to help him spring to his feet in case of need. In this emergency he must, after all, rely upon Bruton; and he forced himself to do so, forced himself to sit still, forced himself to trust in the wit and readiness of the watcher on the porch outside the window.

He was able to maintain this attitude for a space of time that seemed to him interminable; but at length this suspense became unbearable. In spite of himself, he got slowly to his feet, slowly and indolently, as though with no intent in mind. The fire was low and he put a stick upon it; then turned casually to return to his chair. As he did so, his eyes swept the room behind him.

There was no one in sight; but in that instant's glance he saw, at one side of the deerskin hangings on the gun-room door, black vacancy. He knew this meant that door was open. Someone then had come downstairs, opened the door, stepped inside, and now remained there, watching and waiting his time. Coxon felt a faint satisfaction in the knowledge that whoever this might be, he had no firearm. He sat down

in the chair again, secure in his new understanding of the situation.

It occurred to him at once that whoever had entered the gun room might go out through one of the windows and down to the cabin, to return with a rifle; but after a moment he decided that if the gun-room windows were opened a gust of cold air would come from that direction and give him warning.

This conclusion provoked in Coxon a new line of thought, awakened new memories. The question of whether that door had been closed or open at certain periods during the preceding night had seemed to him important; he had asked two or three persons about it. He remembered now that Grace Taber was sure it was open when she went upstairs. The murderer must still have lurked within, as he must lurk there now. Pring had said that when he went to get the rifle, to make sure it had been used in doing that which had been done, the door was closed. But Doctor Moal—and this circumstance struck Coxon forcibly—had said that the door was open.

Each had been positive in his assertion. One or the other might have been mistaken; but Coxon thought it more likely that one or the other had lied. He could see no reason, even assuming Pring's guilt, why the latter should have said the door was closed if it were open. But Doctor Moal? Coxon immediately perceived a certain significance in the situation. If Doctor Moal did the murder, he had passed from his windows to the gun room along the veranda, had entered the gun room from the veranda. If the door had been open when he opened the windows, some blast of cold, the wind being in that quarter, must have warned Wardle and Grace of his coming. If it were closed, this would not have been the case. Therefore it might be to Doctor Moal's advantage to convince Coxon that the door was open, that therefore he could not have entered from the veranda without giving the alarm to the two people in the living room.

This was, Coxon perceived, a possibility. His eager thoughts, leaping along the way thus opened, encountered a momentary obstacle. If Doctor Moal came along the veranda then there should have been tracks in the snow there. But the guide now remembered that the veranda had been free from snow the day before; the stuff had drifted during the

night. The doctor himself had said that it was but just beginning to drift when he got out of bed to join Pring in the living room. This was after the murder. Therefore the snow had not drifted across the veranda before Wardle was slain. Thus Doctor Moal might have passed that way.

Coxon's thought fastened, without relevance, upon another contradiction in the answers to the questions he had asked that day. Doctor Moal, he remembered now, had said very positively that he saw Julie take a book upstairs with her the night before. Yet this was untrue; she had taken no book upstairs. Here again Coxon assumed for a moment that Doctor Moal was guilty. It was necessary to make this assumption in order to arrive at an explanation of this misstatement. If Doctor Moal said this, and if he did it deliberately and with intent to protect himself, then he must have known that Julie had in fact come back downstairs to get the book. He must have wished to prevent Coxon's discovering this movement on her part. If he wished to prevent Coxon's making this discovery, then he must be guilty, must be fearful that Julie had seen him in the living room or seen him pass along the porch outside the library windows. Must have feared, in short, that she knew his guilt!

This conclusion acted upon Coxon like a sharp blow. It served to scatter the clouds which had obscured his mental processes, served to awaken him at last to the true danger in the present situation. If Doctor Moal thought Julie knew him guilty—and Coxon himself had made this suggestion to the doctor—then the physician would be much more likely to attempt to silence Julie than to make a similar attempt on Coxon himself.

With the thought, full of swift conclusion and terror, Coxon leaped to his feet. He whipped the pistol from his belt and he took a swift step toward the foot of the stair.

At the same moment, from somewhere overhead there came a long and strangling scream, appalling in its message of fear and pain.

Upon this scream, as though upon a signal, the curtains of the gun-room door were thrown aside and a man leaped into the living room, coming face to face with Coxon. The apparition startled the old guide; he halted and recoiled and it was a moment before recognition came to him.

Then he saw that the man who thus appeared, and who

must for minutes past have been hiding in the gun room, was Pring, who held the useless target pistol in his hand.

At the same time, and before he could move or speak, Coxon heard Bruton burst in from the other veranda, ready to do whatever might be required of him.

Chapter Eighteen

Coxon's nerves were at such tension that his reactions were no longer conscious or reasoned. When he recovered from the shock and surprise of Pring's appearance, he did not stop to wonder what the other's business in the gun room had been, did not stop to inquire into the reason for this sudden apparition. His own pistol was in his hand, the fact that he knew the weapon which Pring held to be useless did not affect his instinctive action. He jammed the muzzle into Pring's body and cried harshly, "Drop that gun!"

Pring's pistol instantly clattered on the floor; and Bruton, at Coxon's side, stooped and picked it up and broke it to eject the shell. It was empty.

"'Tain't loaded," Bruton exclaimed; and Pring, as though the word had released him, turned quickly away and sprang toward the stair.

"Make haste!" he exclaimed in an urgent tone. "Quickly, Coxon!"

Coxon and Bruton bounded on his heels. The old woodsman realized now that above their heads a struggle was in progress. That first staggering scream had not been repeated; but it had been followed by low cries and ejaculations and hoarse exclamations; and there was a thumping, scuffling sound; and then a voice unrecognizable screamed an oath, shrill and high.

The three men at the head of the stairs came face to face with Grace Taber and Carlotta. These two, roused perhaps from sleep by the first cry, without stopping to draw any covering over their night garments, had rushed into the hall and toward the stair, seeking what protection they might find.

Carlotta threw herself upon her husband's breast, crying out "Warren! Warren!"

Grace was as eager as Carlotta to find some protector, and Pring's arms were wide. He encircled her as well, uttering low and impatient reassurances.

"There, there," he exclaimed. "Let me go, Carlotta! Let me go! It's Julie! Don't you hear her?"

Coxon and Bruton had already reached the door of the room occupied by Rotch and Julie, from which now issued the sound of tumult. But Carlotta held her husband, clinging to him hungrily.

"Don't go, Warren! Please don't go!" she begged.

Coxon shouted to Pring, "The door's barred—bolted—locked!"

"Break it down," Pring directed over his wife's head; and Bruton began to batter at the door with the butt of his rifle, while Carlotta still held her husband.

"I was afraid it was you, Warren," she confessed, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I was afraid it was you."

He pressed her close for a moment, forgetting that he pressed Grace Taber with an equal ardor. Then released them both, his eyes meeting Carlotta's for an instant, full of tenderness and understanding, before he moved to where Bruton still beat in a futile fashion upon the heavy door. From within issued the sounds of desperate combat. Then abruptly these sounds were hushed, and those outside heard silence fall within the barred and bolted room.

This silence was more ominous and alarming than the tumult of the struggle had been. Pring uttered an ejaculation, snatched the rifle from Bruton's hands.

"Here!" he exclaimed; and with all the weight and strength contained in his vigorous body, he drove shatteringly at one of the panels of the door. It splintered; a second and a third stroke burst it clear out. He thrust his arm within, fumbled for a minute and the door swung open.

The three men plunged into the room almost together, Carlotta and Grace in the open doorway behind them. There was no light in the upper hall or in this room; but from the windows came that pale illumination characteristic of winter nights when snow lies across the face of the world. In this vague and uncertain light they saw Julie, sitting up in her bed, huddled back against the headboard with blankets hugged across her breast; and beyond her, twisting at his arm, the figure of a man. By its bulk, this figure was Rotch. There was no one else in the room.

Coxon cried the first question—"What's happened?"

Rotch said slowly, in a jerky tone, the words issuing from between clenched teeth and full of venomous anger, "Moan! Tried to get at Julie! Damn him, he's cut me!"

Pring struck a match and lighted the lamp. The sudden glare half blinded them.

"Where has he gone?" Pring demanded.

Rotch was twisting the torn sleeve of his pajamas about his arm above the elbow, fumbling with it awkwardly. From a slashing wound on the forearm blood flowed. He was all stained with blood and down one of his legs a dark line was rapidly extending.

Without looking around, he jerked his head toward the open window.

"He got away from me. Jumped," he replied.

Bruton ran to the window, Coxon at his side, and they peered out into the night, Bruton holding the rifle steady. On the ground below the snow had drifted; they could perceive a wallowing track which showed the direction in which Doctor Moal had gone. Coxon turned back toward the door, but Pring checked him.

"Here, Coxon!" he cried. "Mr. Rotch is badly hurt. You'll have to help me fix him up. Carlotta!"

Julie slipped out of bed, a blanket about her shoulders.

"Bert, Bert, bless your heart," she said softly to her husband. Rotch grinned at her through set teeth.

"Too slippery for me," he said in a tone curiously apologetic. Then his strength failed and he slumped backward across the bed and lay there. Julie bent above him hovering, while Coxon and Pring stripped away his torn and bloodstained garments. They found deep cuts in arm and leg, and half a dozen minor wounds; but the knife had nowhere touched his body; and after a moment Pring said reassuringly to Julie, "He'll be all right. You'd better go in with Carlotta. Coxon and I will fix him up."

Julie, recovering her courage, strove to assume her familiar air of careless assurance.

"Bert did himself proud," she said softly. "He was asleep when—he came in through the window. I saw him and screamed; and Bert came out of his bed like a lion. I could see the knife, and Bert must have seen it, but he jumped right at him."

Pring nodded, touching her shoulder.

"Good for Bert," he said approvingly. "Bert's all right. But—you'd better go along. Leave us to take care of him."

"I think I'll stay," she replied firmly. "He took care of me, you see."

Coxon had gone to get water, hot and cold; he returned with it now.

"I never thought of his trying to kill you, Mrs. Rotch," he said apologetically. "He must have figured you saw him downstairs."

She shuddered faintly.

"I was afraid," she confessed. "That's why I made sure the door was bolted. He must have come along the porch roof to get in the window. Where has he gone?"

"He can't get far, ma'am," Coxon assured her. "First thing is to take care of Mr. Rotch."

Pring said sorrowfully, "I feared he was the one from the beginning. I should have warned you, Coxon. I knew his nature. A fine fellow, but with a strange, ruthless rage in him at times."

"How did you happen to come downstairs?" Coxon asked.

"I thought he might try to get at you. I expected to take him from behind, when he reached the foot of the stairs—if he came down at all."

Somewhere outside a rifle shot sounded sharply in the cold, still night. They became rigid with attention, listening; and Coxon slipped away and went to find Bruton.

The cook was in the kitchen, and when Coxon appeared he said quickly, "He's got into our cabin, got a gun."

"Did he shoot from there?" Coxon asked.

"I started down the path and he cracked at me," Bruton replied. "You bet I ducked back out of sight quick."

"Let him be," Coxon directed. "But keep a watch that he don't come toward the house. Time enough to go after him in the morning. He may try to get away, but there's no chance for him now."

Bruton nodded, settling himself at a kitchen window whence he could overlook all the ground between the main camp and the guides' cabin. Coxon went back upstairs, to find that Grace and Carlotta, now more warmly attired, had joined Pring and Julie by Rotch's side. The hurt man had regained consciousness when Pring forced whisky between his slack lips. He lay on the bed now, smiling, with a faintly sardonic grimace, while Julie again recounted what had happened in their room—how she saw Doctor Moal creep through the window, saw the knife in his hand, and screamed; how Rotch had flung himself upon the other.

"They rolled over and over, in against the wall," she ex-

plained. Her lips were white, they trembled as she strove to make her tone careless. "It was rather thrilling."

"I couldn't seem to hold his knife hand," Rotch remarked. "The beggar kept it working. Little chap, but he's wiry."

"But I can't believe it even now," Julie remarked. "He was a decent sort, it seemed to me."

"I half guessed, I think," Pring told them steadily.

Rotch looked at him curiously.

"Why?"

Pring glanced at Carlotta and Carlotta looked at Grace, but no one answered Rotch's question.

"I don't suppose we're likely to know," Pring replied.

"Have you got him yet?" Rotch asked.

Coxon said, "He's in the guides' cabin, with the guns. It's going to be a mean business. He's a good shot too."

Pring said slowly, "I shall try to talk to him. Perhaps he will listen to me."

But Carlotta slipped her arm through his, holding him fiercely.

"You won't go near," she protested. "You mustn't go near, Warren."

He smiled at her fears, touched her hand with his, and Coxon saw that the ordeal of the twenty-four hours just past had brought these two together again. This much good at least had come from the evil affair.

"That's the sheriff's job, ma'am," he told Carlotta reassuringly, and she nodded with satisfaction.

"He'll be here soon, won't he?" she asked.

"Pretty soon after daylight, I guess," Coxon replied.

Rotch was comfortable, and Julie said they ought to leave him to rest for a little while. Coxon suggested that he go down and make coffee. None of them was minded to sleep again that night, so Pring and Carlotta and Grace settled themselves before the fire in the living room, Julie staying with her husband, while Coxon and Bruton busied themselves in the kitchen. When coffee and toast were ready and had been served, Pring drew Coxon aside and the two men talked together, apart from the others, in low tones.

Pring said gravely, "Coxon, Doctor Moal was a friend of mine. I knew him rather well—and I don't believe he will try to get away."

The old woodsman asked, with a quick glance, "You think he'll kill himself?"

Pring nodded.

"After all," he said, "this was not a cold-blooded thing he did. It was done in hot rage, and I can guess the torment he's in now. I'm sorry for him, Coxon. He was worth a dozen of Wardle."

Coxon murmured, with thoughtful eyes, "I don't see even now what could've made him do it."

Pring glanced toward the fire.

"Grace has told us," he replied. "When she left Wardle, she stopped on the stair to look back, and he stood up and said he was coming to her room. He even took a step to follow her, and then she saw the faint flash from the gun-room door and saw him fall, and ran upstairs."

Coxon nodded understandingly.

"Doctor Moal liked her pretty well."

"It must have been torture for him to listen to her conversation with Wardle."

"I kind of hope he does fix himself," Coxon said. "It would save a lot of trouble."

"He will," Pring declared.

"Just the same," the old guide remarked, "we can't afford to let him get away. I'm figuring on making a circle around behind the cabin to see to't he don't slip off through the woods before the sheriff gets here, now that you're all fixed comfortable. Bruton will stay here and watch that he don't try to get at you all."

"I have no fear of that," Pring said.

"I thought I'd go out and make a kind of circle," Coxon explained again, "keep out of his sight, but where I can see if he makes a move."

"We must do that much," Pring agreed.

It was with this intent that Coxon presently left the main camp. A pair of Pring's snowshoes served him; Bruton's rifle lay in the crook of his arm. He went out across the veranda on the side away from the cabin, and made a circuit through the still woods, in which lay that shadowy gloom which precedes by an hour or two the first illumination in the east. His snowshoes, save when by chance they clicked together, made no sound in the deep soft snow. He went first directly away from the camp, along the shore, then cut back into the forest and followed the bed of a little trickle of water which was now blanketed with ice and snow, until he came to the flank of a low

ridge in the thick growth behind the guides' cabin. He climbed this and moved along its length and struck down into the run beyond, intending to come to the lake shore at a point beyond the cabin and find there a vantage from which he could keep watch.

But in the run he stumbled upon a fresh snowshoe track, headed away from the cabin, and instantly understood that Doctor Moal had committed himself to the desperate adventure of escape, had set out to make his way to civilization.

Coxon's first thought was instantly to pursue; but a moment's consideration bettered this. Doctor Moal must already have a start of better than an hour; if he had acted resolutely, he might have started out immediately after firing the shot which drove Bruton back to the main camp. An hour and a half, perhaps two hours. The pursuit might well be long, and less speed now meant more speed later. So, instead of following the track, Coxon turned back to the guides' cabin. He kicked off his snowshoes there and made a swift investigation. The cabin was in disorder. From one of the bunks a blanket was gone; Doctor Moal's own rifle had disappeared; the shelves above the stove where some provisions were kept had been disturbed. Coxon's own snowshoes were missing from the sheltered stoop, and on a pad of cheap scratch paper which lay upon the center table a few lines had been scrawled. Coxon glanced at them, puzzled over the hurried and almost undecipherable characters. Doctor Moal had written:

Sorry Warren, old man. I'm afraid I've spoiled your pleasure in this lovely spot forever. We got into an argument, he and I; and he was more obnoxious than usual. I lost my temper and shot him. Nobody else concerned at all. Since then, I suppose I've been insane.

I'm going to make a try at getting away. Probably the decent thing would be to put my toe on the trigger; but I hate giving up. You might advise Coxon not to come after me. As he so subtly said, there's no reason now why I shouldn't kill as often as I choose.

Tell Julie I don't think I could have harmed her in the end.

Warren, my friend, forgive me. And good-by.

There was no signature. Coxon took the scrawl with a

gentleness that was surprising, and folded it and held it in his hand when presently he went toward the house.

"But all the same," he told Pring when the latter had read, "I guess I'll trail along after him." Pring nodded.

"I'll go with you." There were tears in his eyes.

"Better not," Coxon urged. "One man's as good as two. You stay and take care of the folks here. You'll want to explain things to the sheriff, anyway."

His arguments and Carlotta's pleadings were successful; Pring agreed to stay. Bruton would have accompanied the older man; but Coxon forbade this.

"They may need you here," he reminded the other.

He was preparing a small packet of food, corn bread and bacon and raw chocolate; and half an hour after discovering Doctor Moal's escape he set out in pursuit.

The snowshoe trail which Doctor Moal had left, and which made easier going for Coxon, led at first directly away from the cabin, in such wise that the cabin itself had prevented anyone in the main camp from getting a glimpse of the fugitive. Within five minutes Coxon had left the shores of the lake behind; he found himself in the thick forest, in a gloom so profound beneath the spruces that, although the snow radiated some faint light, it was still difficult to see for any distance. He followed the trail as much by feeling as by sight. The tumbled and disordered snow bore no stains visible to his eyes; the uneven surface upon which in this light no shadows lay was apparently all smooth and white, but after a time his vision became accustomed to the gloom and he made better time.

Doctor Moal had taken the line of a great arc; and Coxon, familiar with the locality, before very long thought he guessed the other's plan. The fugitive quite evidently intended to skirt the higher ground along the shore of the pond and so work downward toward the river; would no doubt seek to cross and plunge into the wilderness beyond, so making a difficult way to the railroad which ran some sixty miles to the southward. His safer way, Coxon thought, would have been to go north. To the south all the countryside would be warned to expect him. The guide had a momentary impulse to turn back and himself send out this warning; but he reminded himself that this would be the sheriff's first action upon learning of the murderer's escape. There was time and to spare.

But a few minutes later he found reason to change this opinion, for the trail he was following swung at right angles toward the east, and at once turned north again. Coxon was puzzled by this apparently aimless maneuver; he drove ahead as swiftly as was possible. Doctor Moal by this circle had rounded the head of the pond, doubling on his tracks, and now approached the old wood road along which Bul-lard and Newry had gone the day before on their way out for assistance. By and by the tracks of the fugitive joined these other prints, and a few moments later Coxon understood. The telephone wire was looped from tree to tree along the ancient road. Where it hung low the doctor had drawn it down, cut away a considerable section and apparently carried the wire away with him when he pursued his course.

Coxon immediately quickened his pace. The affair had become a duel between him and the murderer. If Doctor Moal could reach the railroad he might yet escape; it would be difficult if not impossible to repair the telephone in time to send out a warning. Half a mile farther on Coxon found that the line had been cut again. The loose ends hung dangling, and again a considerable section had been removed. A mile beyond, the operation had been repeated; and Coxon smiled grimly. Doctor Moal was thorough, he told himself. He had taken all pains to make assurance sure. The guide glanced now and then to right or left, trying to discover where the fugitive had thrown away the lengths of wire he carried. If they could be found, to repair the breaks would be easy; but Doctor Moal apparently appreciated this fact, for his snowshoe prints went steadily on; he never turned aside to seek a hiding place for the burden which must be, Coxon knew, a considerable one and difficult to handle.

As the first faint light appeared in the east, filling the forest with a gray illumination, Coxon passed another break in the wire. But a little way beyond Doctor Moal had turned aside, toward the lake which now lay to his west; and Coxon settled down to the drudgery and grinding torment of pursuit. He was already beginning to grow weary; knew the man ahead of him must be more weary than he. Yet the other had shown no sign of faltering. Coxon remembered that Doctor Moal was alert and active, no doubt in good condition. Furthermore, the odds

of youth on his side balanced, perhaps equaled, those of custom and long habit on the part of the old guide.

He was glad at last to come out upon the surface of the lake. Doctor Moal had turned here, skirting the shore, finding easier going upon the surface of the snow-covered ice, where no underbrush impeded him. Coxon drove himself to a half trot, his long shoes swinging. His head was bent, his effort was all concentrated upon speed, and it was only at intervals that his eyes cast ahead among the bare white surface of the lake, now visible throughout its breadth in the increasing light of day.

In one of these glances he at last perceived a small black figure near the shore and perhaps a mile ahead of him, and his pulse leaped at the thought that already he was overhauling the man whom he pursued. His eyes held this figure, while unconsciously he quickened his pace. The other man was silhouetted against the snow, outside a wooded point which extended into the lake. Coxon saw him swing in toward this point, expected him to disappear behind it; but instead the man came between the point and Coxon's eye, and the guide checked himself startled into understanding. The other man was not seeking to escape; he was coming toward Coxon.

Convinced of this, the guide went forward more slowly and his eyes never left the other's figure. When they were half a mile apart he could see the rifle in the other man's hands, and he held himself ready to leap to one side or to drop in the snow if the rifle were lifted to be fired. The other came steadily on, his pace a swift one; and Coxon became more and more alert. When scarce a quarter of a mile separated them, he chose discretion, moved in toward the shore, and at last frankly stepped into the shelter of a boulder, only his head visible to the other man, his weapon ready for defense if need arose.

The light was waxing; it became possible to see more clearly, and Coxon began to perceive details of the other's figure. He had not realized that Doctor Moal was so large; also the other's gait was unfamiliar, and the red plaid blanket cot which the approaching man wore was strange to the woodsman's eyes. He tried to remember whether Doctor Moal had possessed such a garment.

The truth burst upon him when the other was perhaps two hundred yards away. The man who approached was

not Doctor Moal. Upon the heels of this discovery came recognition. The newcomer, following the fugitive's back trail, was the sheriff. Coxon at once shouted a greeting and came out upon the lake to meet the officer. When they drew nearer, Coxon saw that the other's face was grave.

He said steadily, "Morning, sheriff."

The other replied, "Hello, Bob." And at once asked, "Whose snowshoe tracks are these?"

"A sport named Moal—a doctor. He's the one that killed this Wardle. We found it out this morning."

The sheriff spit upon the snow.

"Yeah, I guessed that."

"You meet him?" Bob asked. The other shook his head.

"No, not to say meet him."

"Where'd you hit his track?"

"He fell in a spring hole, through the ice," the sheriff told Coxon; and the old guide received this information with a slow nod.

"Fell in, did he? I guess he decided that was the easiest way."

"It didn't look that way to me," the other protested. "I come on his tracks down near the mouth. You know there's always two-three spring holes in that little cove there. He'd seen them, and he turned that way, right angles to the way he'd been going. He headed straight for one of the big ones; but there was one that had crusted over and the snow on top didn't show where it was. It let him in."

Coxon looked far down the lake.

"Didn't get him out?" he asked in a low tone.

"He was gone out of sight, time I got there," the sheriff replied. "No sign of him left; only off to one side there was a coil of telephone wire, like it had flew out of his hand when he felt himself going."

"Telephone wire?" Coxon asked, suddenly alert; and when the sheriff nodded, the old guide said thoughtfully, "I guess I can figure what happened. He'd cut the line three-four times between here and camp, and he knew if he left the wire around it would be easy fixed. So he lugged it off with him. Prob'ly it got heavy, and when he saw the holes in the ice it looked like a good chance to get rid of the stuff. I guess he figured on throwing it in one of the holes."

The sheriff considered this theory. "Prob'ly that was it,"

he decided at last. For a moment neither man spoke, and the great silence of the North brooded all around them.

Then Coxon said, a little wearily, "Well, we might as well get back to camp. They'll want to know."

"Guess so," the other agreed.

They turned up the lake once more, moving in single file, two small dark figures upon the wide expanse of white. A mile or two behind them, far down the pond, the open water which showed like a black spot upon the white blanket of snow was already stiffening in the grip of the still and relentless cold. Ice began to form like a seal upon a door forever closed.



1255

A KILLER AMONG US

**Six people, a murderer
among them, trapped in
the Maine woods...**

**The shock of sudden
death, and the stress of
fear, draw them ever
tighter into a web of
unbearable suspense...as
the world-famous novel-
ist, Ben Ames Williams,
unravels a masterful
puzzle in the greatest mys-
tery tradition of Gardner,
Christie, Rinehart...**

**LION
LIBRARY
EDITIONS
35c**

